

# The Tragedy of Mesopotamia











# The Tragedy of Mesopotamia

BY

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## PREFACE.

It is nearly twenty-one years since General Maude's victorious army entered Baghdad, and, compared with other campaigns of the Great War, that in Mesopotamia has inspired curiously few books.

The 'Official History' has the limitations proper to its character, and the particular objective of Sir Arnold Wilson's great classics, 'Loyalties' and 'A Clash with Loyalties,' have seemed to leave room for a book with somewhat different end in view.

The opportunities, too, which the present writer has enjoyed for observing (1) some of the difficulties of the campaign, (2) the possibilities of the country if developed on correct lines, and subsequently for studying the effects of Britain's post-war policy in Iraq, must be the excuse for the present volume.

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## CHAPTER I.

IN June 1914 I was at home on leave from Burma, where I held the post of Chairman and Chief Engineer of the Rangoon Port Trust, and we had just completed one of the largest river training works in the world.

A particularly gay London season was in full swing, the summer weather was a glorious con-

### ERRATA

P. 2, fourth line from bottom, 14th September *should be* 4th September

P. 128, sixteenth line, February 1916 *should be* 1917

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prove disastrous, was to be tackled by an International Commission of experts. The late Admiral Sir Edmond Slade, who had known me in Burma, asked me to discuss with him the various schemes for improvement, and invited me to be the British member of the Commission, provided the Government of Burma would spare my services for a



## CHAPTER I.

IN June 1914 I was at home on leave from Burma, where I held the post of Chairman and Chief Engineer of the Rangoon Port Trust, and we had just completed one of the largest river training works in the world.

A particularly gay London season was in full swing, the summer weather was a glorious contrast to the climate of Burma, and politically there did not appear to be a cloud in the sky.

In the Persian Gulf the question of the terminus of the Baghdad railway had at last been settled and the long-standing British rights of navigation on the rivers of Mesopotamia confirmed, whilst the problem of improving the conditions of navigation on the Shatt-el-Arab River, where there were exceptional difficulties to be overcome and where unskilled operations might prove disastrous, was to be tackled by an International Commission of experts. The late Admiral Sir Edmond Slade, who had known me in Burma, asked me to discuss with him the various schemes for improvement, and invited me to be the British member of the Commission, provided the Government of Burma would spare my services for a

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

few months from Rangoon. The matter was under consideration, and on 1st July I went with my family to Harrogate, where we were all peacefully enjoying ourselves, when on the 4th August came the news that England had declared war against Germany. It was a staggering blow, and no one even faintly realised what it meant. I called at the India Office at once and offered my services in any capacity, but was told that all Indian officials must return to India as soon as possible and carry on with their respective duties ; and on the 18th August I sailed from Tilbury for Bombay in the P. & O. *Ballarat* with 102 troops and 300 passengers, chiefly Indian officials, 34 of whom were booked for Burma.

The voyage was an interesting one, as everywhere there were signs of war. Going down the Thames at night, searchlights blazed at every point. At Plymouth examination vessels were hard at work and searchlights in operation on the forts. Nearing Gibraltar we passed a French fleet of 4 cruisers and 3 destroyers, and there were already a number of German prizes in the harbour. At Malta there were 3 French battle-ships, 3 cruisers, and a number of destroyers in port, and Port Said seemed full of captured German vessels. In the Red Sea, on the 14th September, we passed 15 transports escorted by 2 cruisers, conveying the first contingent of the Indian Army bound for France. At Aden there

## ARRIVAL AT RANGOON

were 4 German and Austrian prizes, and one of them, the *Franz Ferdinand*, I was destined to see at a later date in Mesopotamia. On the 11th September we arrived at Bombay (24 days from London), and passengers for Burma entrained for Calcutta, where we arrived on the 14th, and found to our annoyance that all shipping was held up by the presence of the German cruiser *Emden* in the Bay of Bengal. Day after day we stayed in Calcutta with nothing to do but to play golf at the Tollygunge Club, until at last, on the 6th October, we received sailing orders and dashed across the Bay of Bengal in a cyclone with all lights out, arriving in Rangoon on the 6th October, having taken 7 weeks from London instead of the usual 20 days. In Rangoon there was no change except that the German and Austrian merchants had been interned and their rice mills taken over by Government, much to the joy of their British rivals in the rice trade. Business as usual was the cry; we heard little of the war, and I was prepared most unwillingly to settle down to comparative idleness for the 'duration.'

Meanwhile in the Persian Gulf and Mesopotamia the news was far from satisfactory, troops were being moved from Baghdad to Basra, objections were made to the presence of our ships of war in Turkish territorial waters, and it was obvious that the clouds of war were fast gathering.

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

On the 16th October 1914, when further delay would have been dangerous, the first brigade of what was known as Indian Expeditionary Force D, under the command of Brig.-General Delamain, sailed from Bombay under sealed orders, the strength of the force being 4720 men with 460 followers and 1290 animals. The 5 transports arrived at Bahrain, an island about half-way up the Gulf, on the 23rd October, and sailed again on the 29th October. General Delamain's orders were to occupy Abadan in Persian territory, for the protection of the oil refineries, and to refrain from any hostile action against the Turks; but on the 1st November, on being informed that war had broken out with Turkey, he at once directed his attention to the country of the Turks, and after a short bombardment of the forts, troops were landed, who took possession of the Fao telegraph station at the mouth of the Shatt-el-Arab River. The force then proceeded up the river and landed at Saniya opposite the oil refineries, and on the 13th November Lieut.-General Barrett arrived with the Second Brigade of the 6th Division and took command of the operations. The next objective was Sahil about ten miles above Saniya, where considerable opposition was encountered, as the Turks with five guns had made a stand at an old mud fort. Sahil was captured on the 12th November, our casualties amounting to 489, and the troops camped on the river bank.

## OCCUPATION OF BASRA

The force had been seriously hampered from the first landing at Fao by the shortage of craft for landing men and stores from the transports and lack of men to row the ships' boats, but now were able to requisition three river steamers belonging to the Tigris Navigation Co., which were lying in the Karun River, and these for the time being saved the situation.

We occupied Basra on the 23rd November, and found the lower-class Arabs busily employed in looting and burning the houses and murdering the occupants, a practice common all over the world once the forces of law and order have been suspended or relaxed. Immediate and drastic action was necessary, and when order had been restored and a number of Arabs hanged, the force made a ceremonial entry, and Sir Percy Cox, the Chief Political Officer, read a proclamation to the assembled notables and others, assuring them of the friendliness of the British Government and their wish to prove good friends and protectors of the Arab community.

Basra now became the principal base of the army for all future operations, and as the whole area was in an indescribably filthy condition with plague, smallpox, cholera, dysentery, malaria and typhus, endemic, no sanitary system, and the river and creeks the sole sources of water supply, a considerable amount of work was necessary before accommodation could be provided for the troops, who meanwhile bivou-

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

acked outside the town. The area known as Basra consisted of the town of that name, lying about two miles inland from the river, to which it was connected by a navigable creek, the small town of Ashar lying about a quarter of a mile inland, and the river-front on which were located the Customs House, the various Consulates, the European merchants' houses, the Turkish Commodore's house, the Sheikh of Mohammerah's Palace, and other buildings.

In the days before the war there was very little traffic on the Shatt-el-Arab River, and seldom more than two or three steamers in port at the same time. There was no port accommodation in the shape of wharves, sheds, warehouses, cranes, or moorings, because such were not needed. Ocean steamers lay in the stream, and loading and unloading was carried on with native boats called *mahailas*, curious looking craft with high forward sloping masts, huge rudders, lateen sails, and cut-away prows. There were a few small landing jetties for motor launches, but with the exception of two miles of unmetalled road between Ashar and Basra, there were no roads of any description and there was no through communication along the river bank. The surrounding country was occupied by date-palm gardens, watered by creeks from the main river and intersected by irrigation ditches; at every high tide the front was inundated, and when the rivers were in flood the entire area was

## ACCOMMODATION FOR ARMY

under water for months at a time. In the rainy season a particularly glutinous mud was formed, in which it was impossible to stand upright and in which wheeled traffic and animals slid in all directions. Three miles up-stream from Basra at Ma'qil the river narrowed, with deep water close to the bank, and there the Germans had built a small wharf for unloading direct from steamers material for the Baghdad railway ; but the wharf was unapproachable from Basra except by water or by making a long *détour* into the desert behind. The only asset was the river itself, which between Basra and Ma'qil was wide enough and deep enough to accommodate an ocean fleet.

General Barrett and his staff were therefore on arrival at Basra faced with the problem of finding accommodation for some 20,000 men, 7000 animals, 9 guns, transport carts, &c. ; and, what was more difficult, accommodation for the manifold supplies, ammunition, and equipment necessary for the maintenance of an army in the field, all of which had to be brought by steamer from Bombay. There was no time for elaborate arrangements ; the troops were camped at Ma'qil and in the desert behind Basra ; the staff went to houses requisitioned for the purpose ; and the supply departments, S. & T. Ordnance and Works, perforce dumped their goods as best they could on the foreshore. The troops were busy cleaning up the surroundings of their camps

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and in unloading and landing the goods from the store-ships, and the engineers were fully employed in bridging the numerous creeks on the foreshore and clearing spaces for the depots, so by the end of the month the force had fairly settled down and the supply services were functioning as well as possible under the circumstances. Lines of store-ships were, however, beginning to accumulate in the river in the absence of efficient arrangements for their discharge. General Barrett had obtained his objective by the capture of Basra, and now the question arose as to the next move.

It should be borne in mind that at this time very little was known about Mesopotamia or the enormous difficulties to be encountered in making any advance beyond Basra. We had had a Consul-General at Baghdad for a number of years, and an English Company (the Tigris and Euphrates Navigation Co.) had been plying a service of steamers between Basra and Baghdad.

Sir William Willcocks, the famous engineer, had recently completed a monumental scheme for the irrigation of Mesopotamia, but, for military purposes, there were no maps or other reliable data on which to formulate a plan of campaign. Nevertheless, such was the lure of Baghdad, even at this early stage, that a proposal to make a dash up the river to that city with one brigade complete with horses and guns was for a time seriously entertained. It was



## CAPTURE OF QURNA

believed that the available river transport would be sufficient, but it was admitted that the co-operation of the numerous Arab tribes was essential. Fortunately wiser councils prevailed, and this wild scheme was abandoned in favour of an advance to Qurna, a small town situated at the junction of the Tigris and old Euphrates, forty-six miles above Basra. The total river transport at General Barrett's disposal was the three light-draught river steamers owned by the Tigris Navigation Co, seventeen small lighters, and half a dozen motor boats picked up locally. Shortly after the occupation of Basra, Commander Hamilton, R.I.M., the Marine Transport Officer, had with commendable prevision strongly urged that twelve river steamers similar to those already in use should be ordered at once from India, but the matter was not considered urgent by the staff, and no action was taken until January 1915, when seven steamers and two lighters were ordered.

After considerable fighting and with the assistance of the naval flotilla, Qurna was captured on the 9th December, and we thereby obtained possession of the whole river tract between Qurna and the sea. A new proclamation was issued again explaining our desire to be on friendly terms with the Arabs, and stating that the wish of the British Government was to free the Arabs from the oppression of the Turk and bring them advancement and increase of

prosperity and trade. Unfortunately many of the Arabs considered these proclamations a sign of weakness, and so far from responding to our advances they showed intense hostility throughout the campaign.

In February the river rose and flooded all the countryside; we had to withdraw most of our troops from Qurna; a determined Turkish attack was threatened at Shu'aiba near Basra, and difficulties arose at Ahwaz in Persia. It was clear that Force D. would require reinforcement, and the Government of India decided to reorganise the force as an Army Corps of two infantry divisions and one cavalry brigade under the Command of General Sir John Nixon, who was then commanding the Northern Army in India. General Sir Arthur Barrett returned to India, and Sir John Nixon landed at Basra with the Army Corps staff on 5th April 1915. Major-General Townshend was given command of the 6th Division and Major-General Gorringe the 12th Division. Major-General Davison became Inspector-General of Communications and Surgeon-General Hathaway Deputy Director of Medical Services. I mention these names as they were destined to take a leading part in future operations.

Sir John Nixon arrived just in time to take part in the first real battle of the campaign. Since the capture of Qurna there had been no important action, but now a Turkish Army,

## BATTLE OF SHU'AIBA

composed of 12,000 Turkish regulars under the command of Sulaiman Bey Al-Askari with 10,000 Arab tribesmen and thirty-two guns coming down by way of the Euphrates valley, made a most determined effort to recapture Basra, and the battle of Shu'aiba was fought on 12th, 13th, and 14th April. The state of the country was not conducive to military operations, as the Tigris had overflowed its banks, flooding the area between Basra city and our base on the river-front, whilst the waters from the Euphrates had inundated to a depth of several feet the area between Basra and the camp at Shu'aiba. Fighting was severe and continuous for three days, but ended in the complete defeat of the enemy, who were, however, able to retire with their guns, our infantry being in too exhausted a condition to take up the pursuit. Our casualties in the three days amounted to 1257, and the Turks double that number. The people of Basra had confidently anticipated a British defeat, and even went so far as to prepare an address of welcome to Sulaiman Al-Askari. This unfortunate officer committed suicide during the retreat, and the fleeing Turkish soldiers were ruthlessly murdered by their Arab allies, who invariably turned against the beaten side, whether British or Turk.

The Turks having been defeated decisively at the battle of Shu'aiba, Sir John Nixon had time to consider the situation and decide on his future

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action having regard to his instructions, which were—

- (1) To retain complete control of the lower portion of Mesopotamia, comprising the Basra Province.
- (2) So far as feasible to secure the safety of the Anglo-Persian oil-fields' pipe-lines and refineries.
- (3) After acquainting himself on the spot with the present situation to submit—
  - (i) A plan for the effective occupation of the Basra Province.
  - (ii) A plan for the subsequent advance on Baghdad.

He was also specially to report on the adequacy and suitability of the river gunboats and transports now *en route*, namely :—

Two Nile boats, armament not yet known.  
Seven paddlers from the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company, with two flats from the Eastern Bengal State Railway.

Two motor boats.

Four tugs.

Four steam launches, two steam cutters, and two horse-boats, understood to be coming from Egypt.

The seven paddlers arrived in May, but were of too deep a draught to be of any service above Qurna in the low-water season, and the two Nile gunboats sank during their passage through the Red Sea.

## SIR JOHN NIXON'S PLANS

“There were now several alternatives before Sir John Nixon. He could push on towards Nasiriya, and taking advantage of the Turks' disorganisation and the enmity being displayed towards them by the Arabs, might even be able to occupy Nasiriya, one of the main objectives. It appears that General Nixon would have liked to follow this plan, but he lacked the necessary transport to move a sufficient force either across the desert or by water. Moreover, he had very little definite information regarding the country and the difficult water routes of this area, and it would take some little time to obtain what was necessary in this respect. An advance might be made up the Tigris towards Amara from Qurna, but here again the lack of river transport rendered such an operation out of the question for the time being.

“Another alternative was to concentrate a British force at Ahwaz to operate against the Turks and Arabs in Arabistan; such operations would free General Nixon's eastern flank, secure the position of the Shaikh of Mohammerah, and would restore the supply of oil which had been interrupted. The chief difficulties to be encountered in this area, without considering lack of land and river transport, were likely to lie in the desert nature of the country and the daily increasing heat.”<sup>1</sup>

General Nixon decided to begin with operations in the Ahwaz direction, and Major-General Gorringe with the 12th Division advanced at the end of April and crossed the Karkha River

<sup>1</sup> ‘Official History of the War—Mesopotamia.’ Vol. I.

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on 7th May, the Turks retreating to Amara. He then turned his attention to an intensely hostile Arab tribe, and after punishing them severely, ended operations by demonstrating against the Turkish force between him and Amara, thus preventing reinforcements from joining the Turks on the Tigris. Our casualties in action were few, but the intense heat in the burning deserts of Arabistan had completely worn out the troops, causing 2773 admissions to hospital.

The operations had been completely successful, the oil pipe-line had been repaired by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, and General Gorringe left Ahwaz for Basra on the 15th June.

It was now the worst time of the year for military or any other operations: the rivers were in full flood, which meant that the whole of the surrounding country was under water, and the terrible Mesopotamian hot weather was in full blast. General Nixon had a reputation for taking the offensive wherever and whenever possible; and taking advantage of the deeper river, which enabled him to use all his river transport, he decided to advance on two fronts, and preparations were made for General Townshend and the 6th Division to advance on Amara, and for General Gorringe to go up the Euphrates and attack Nasiriya.

Before beginning operations the sanction of the Viceroy and the Secretary of State for India

was required, and the opinion of these officials and their respective staffs was far from unanimous as to the necessity for the projected advance, especially that to Nasiriya.

General Nixon's reasons for advancing up the Tigris were that the Turks were concentrating above Qurna, and an offensive in that direction was absolutely essential, and that with Amara in British hands he could extend his control over the Basra Province, withdraw troops from Ahwaz, and guarantee the safety of the oil pipeline in Persia.

With reference to the proposed advance on the Euphrates, General Nixon considered that unless we were prepared to occupy Nasiriya and gain control of the powerful Arab tribes in that neighbourhood, there would be a possibility of an attack on Basra similar to that which ended in the battle of Shu'aiba ; and further, a Turkish force at Nasiriya would be a permanent menace to his line of communications.

Finally, the advances were sanctioned, but General Nixon was informed he need not ask for reinforcements, as no more troops could be sent to Mesopotamia.

General Townshend began his advance on the Turkish positions situated some miles north of Qurna on the 31st May. The engagement was an amphibious one, and is generally known as Townshend's 'regatta,' because, owing to the flooded state of the country, it was decided to

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

put the infantry into native *bellams* (a kind of canoe propelled by a pole as in a punt). A flotilla of 500 of these, each holding ten men with rifles with an armoured shield in the centre, and supported by the gunboats and sloops of the Navy, advanced to the fight, and by their intense fire captured all the enemy's positions. The Turks fled up the Tigris in steamers and *mahailas*, pursued by the naval flotilla, and the following day Amara was occupied, the garrison surrendering without a shot being fired. Our casualties by enemy action were few, but in one day 117 men went down with heat-stroke.

The 'Official History' remarks that—

“By the middle of June the heat everywhere in Mesopotamia had become so great as to affect seriously the health of the troops, and this was aggravated by the difficulty of convalescence in this trying climate.”

Immediately after the capture of Amara, General Nixon began arrangements for the advance on Nasiriya, and General Gorringe had placed at his disposal an infantry brigade which, due to sickness, could only muster 1994 rifles, and the co-operation of the naval flotilla under Captain Nunn, R.N.

There was no road to Nasiriya, and the surrounding country was under water; the advance had therefore to be made in river steamers from Qurna along the old Euphrates channel to the



## OCCUPATION OF NASIRIYA

Hammar Lake, which was fifteen miles broad. It had been ascertained by reconnaissance that a narrow channel existed out of the lake to the main Euphrates River, but it was blocked by a substantial irrigation dam. Operations began on the 27th June, and for the conveyance of the infantry a flotilla of *bellams* had been found necessary. The difficulties attending the operations had been greatly under-estimated: there was a hold-up at the dam which had to be breached by dynamite; there was unexpected and determined opposition, and the effective strength of the force was much reduced by the intense heat. The situation was critical in the extreme, as the Turks were in a strong defensive position and numerically superior in rifles; lastly, the water in the lake was falling, and the channels would soon be impassable for river steamers. General Gorringe at once sent for reinforcements, and a brigade followed by another brigade and some guns arrived only just in time.

Finally, the various obstacles were overcome, and the operations ended in the defeat of the Turkish force of 6000 men, exclusive of the Arab tribes, and Nasiriya was occupied by General Gorringe on the 25th July.

I believe it is now admitted that a mistake was made in advancing up the Euphrates and capturing the town of Nasiriya in July 1915, as no good purpose was served thereby, and at the time the Commander-in-Chief in India objected

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on the ground that the force in Mesopotamia was too weak and lacked sufficient river craft. It had been assumed that there was a waterway for river steamers between Kut and Nasiriya by the Shatt-al-Hai, and that the Turks could, by this route, send masses of men to Nasiriya and thence across the desert to Basra. It was also assumed that the powerful Muntafik tribes, whose headquarters was Nasiriya, would be impressed and pacified by our conquest of the town. It was discovered at a later date that the Shatt-al-Hai was only navigable for river steamers during the high flood season, and then only to a place called Shatra, whence troops had to march across country the last thirty miles to Nasiriya, while the Muntafik tribes were by no means won over by our occupation of their territory and gave constant trouble.

Moreover, valuable transport, both land and river, was taken away from the main scene of operations on the Tigris, and the strength of the main army dissipated by leaving a whole brigade as a permanent garrison at Nasiriya, supplies for which had to be brought from Basra.

At the time of General Gorringe's advance the Hammar Lake could be navigated by steamers drawing five feet of water, but the low-water season was approaching, and by the end of July the depth had fallen to three feet, and after July all steamer traffic stopped, and troops and

stores had to be poled across the lake in *bellams*, which sometimes had to be dragged through the mud.

Our casualties from enemy action were under 1000, but many more fell out through sickness, and General Nixon in his despatch reporting the brilliant success of the operations, observed :—

“ Seldom, if ever, have our troops been called upon to campaign in more trying heat than they have experienced this summer in the marshy plains of Mesopotamia. Many indeed succumbed to the effects of the sun when trenches had to be manned without a vestige of shade, and others were worn out by illness and restless nights spent in digging and carrying stores from the ships or disturbed by the attacks and fire of the enemy.”

General Nixon had now ample time and food for reflection. He had won two brilliant victories, and in each case attained his objective. Amara, 200 miles by river from Basra, was a modern town, a good supply centre, and with a very much better climate than Basra, and, moreover, was the centre link between our line of communication and that of the Turk—beyond Amara our transport troubles became greater than those of the Turk. Nasiriya was also a modern town, well laid out, a centre of considerable trade, and the headquarters of the Turks in the country of the Muntafiks, the most powerful and warlike tribe in Southern Mesopotamia.

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General Nixon had already stated in reply to a question from India that he considered that by the occupation of Amara and Nasiriya he had achieved control of the Basra Province, but that to occupy Kut-al-Amara would render our position still more effective, as we should thus hold both ends of the Shatt-al-Hai.

In connection with any scheme for an advance above Amara, by far the most vital question was that of river transport. The waters were falling rapidly, and would not rise again until the following February; and although all the river steamers could travel as far as Qurna, there was a desperate shortage of light draught craft for navigation beyond. This was fully realised by Major-General Kemball, Sir John Nixon's Chief of Staff, who, in a memorandum dated 8th July, after detailing the various occasions on which operations had been seriously hampered for want of river transport, observed :—

“ There can be no doubt that river transport will continue to be the governing factor in any future operations. . . . In short, more powerful light draught river steamers and plenty of them, and not only ships but personnel and material for their maintenance, are regarded by the General Staff of this Force as our principal need. It is also thought necessary to add the warning that if steps are not taken in good time to meet these requirements, we are running grave risks of a breakdown at possibly a serious moment. At the present time we cannot make the most

## NECESSITY FOR MORE SHIPS

effective use of the troops available owing to want of ships, and in any crisis insufficiency of river transport would limit the scope of reinforcements, while a breakdown of shipping might have still more serious consequences."

These were indeed words of wisdom, and should have caused any army commander to pause and think. The memorandum was forwarded to the Government of India with a letter emphasising the urgency of the situation, and after much delay orders for the craft were placed in England in November 1915. But England was overwhelmed with orders for the main armies in France; Mesopotamia was only a side-show, and it was evident that the steamers could not be expected in Basra for a year; an effort was therefore made to obtain from India any craft of the required draught (3 feet 6 inches). None were available, and in any case their transit would not be possible until the end of the monsoon in November or December 1915.

Another matter calling for General Nixon's attention was the lack of adequate provision for the sick and wounded, which had become painfully apparent after the battles of Nasiriya. There was no hospital ship on the whole river; medical staff and equipment were insufficient; there was no organisation of clearing stations, and the hospitals at Basra were overcrowded.

"After the battle, as after the preceding engagement, I spent some hours assisting in the

evacuation of the wounded. I was horrified at what I saw, for at every point it was clear that the shamefully bad arrangements arose from bad staff work on the part of the medical authorities rather than from inherent difficulties. The wounded were crowded on board to lie on iron decks that had not been cleaned since horses and mules had stood on them for a week. There were few mattresses.”<sup>1</sup>

With these difficulties and grave warnings before him, surely if General Nixon had insisted on sitting tight at Amara, and there consolidating his position until his transport and other problems had been solved, no one could have blamed him.

However, General Nixon's temperament would not allow him to remain still, whatever the consequences, and at an early date he put forward proposals for an advance to Kut-al-Amara. He considered that its occupation would consolidate our military position, and although he now knew that enemy steamers could not move down the Shatt-al-Hai to Nasiriya he thought that a concentration at Kut by the Turks threatened both Amara and Nasiriya. He also argued the political advantages of interposing a force between the Turks and the Bani Lam tribe. It is worthy of note that in every advance the necessity for controlling or placating the tribes in front of us was put forward as a reason, the fact being that one might as well try and control or placate

<sup>1</sup> “‘Loyalties,’ Mesopotamia, 1914-1917.” By Sir Arnold Wilson.

a pack of jackals or hyenas as any Arab tribe. General Nixon admitted that our line of communication would be extended by 153 miles, necessitating more line of communication troops and more difficulties with supplies ; but against this he put a possible reduction of the Nasiriya garrison and easier navigation between Amara and Kut, this last reason being entirely fallacious, as in the low-water season the numerous shoals and lack of defined channels made navigation most difficult, as General Nixon subsequently found out by practical experience.

General Townshend, commanding the 6th Division, was in India on sick leave in July, and records the substance of a conversation with Sir Beauchamp Duff, the Commander-in-Chief :—

“ He (the Chief) informed me that it had been decided that probably I should advance to Kut-al-Amara directly I got back to Amara, an advance of another 120 miles. Sir John Nixon had given strong reasons for urging this step, but sanction had not yet arrived from England. I told the Commander-in-Chief that I could guarantee to defeat Nur-ud-Din, who was entrenched in a position covering Kut-al-Amara, and to throw him into the Tigris, but I hoped that with my present force I should not be ordered to advance to Baghdad. It was not for me, I said, to point out to him the grave risks of continuing the strategic offensive with inadequate forces, and with no troops on the line of communication behind me—a line between two and three hundred miles long. He fully

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

agreed with me, and said with emphasis, 'Not one inch, Townshend, shall you go beyond Kut-al-Amara unless I make you up to adequate strength.' I mentioned that I ought to have fully an army corps to take Baghdad and keep it."<sup>1</sup>

General Townshend returned to Basra on the 21st August, and on the 23rd August received instructions to destroy and disperse the enemy and occupy Kut-al-Amara, thereby consolidating our control of the Basra Province. On the 1st September troops began to move up by river to Ali Gharbi (seventy-nine miles above Amara), where they had concentrated by the 11th September. By the 16th September the force had reached Sannaiyat, eight miles from the Turkish position, the troops marching along the river bank accompanied by the river boats and naval flotilla. There was a great shortage of both land and water transport, there were no water carts, and the temperature in the shade was 110° to 116°. At Sannaiyat there was a halt to send back the ships in order to bring up the field batteries and supplies, an action which caused General Townshend to comment on his having to battledore and shuttlecock his transport to fetch up troops and stores in homeopathic doses.

General Townshend's fighting strength was 13,000 men, and the Turks, who were astride the Tigris eight miles below Kut in a formidable

<sup>1</sup> 'My Campaign in Mesopotamia.' By General Townshend.



## MEDICAL DEFICIENCIES

position they had been strengthening for months past, were supposed to have 8000 combatants, 18 guns, and 3000 Arab horsemen. General Townshend was confident of success, and had told General Nixon that if he routed the Turks and stampeded them, he might follow them into Baghdad. General Nixon agreed, and said he might be able to enter Baghdad with him.

On the 26th September an advance was made to Nakhailat, about four miles from the Turks, and at dawn on the 27th September the battle began and raged all day and into the night. The result was another complete victory for General Townshend, but there was no question of dashing on to Baghdad. The Turks were defeated, not routed, and they retired in good order to prepared positions at Ctesiphon; and although an attempt was made at pursuit by the naval flotilla, followed by infantry in steamers, it had to be abandoned, as in the low river the ships were constantly going aground. The pursuing force reached Aziziya, seventy-six miles below Ctesiphon, where they landed.

Our casualties amounted to 1233, being many in excess of the number allowed for. The medical arrangements were bad; the medical staff was below normal; field ambulances were overcrowded, one having to deal with 500 patients; the supply of blankets and food was short, and there were insufficient clearing stations and no hospital ships.

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

It was, however, a great victory, brilliantly planned by General Townshend and gallantly fought to a finish by all ranks. The capture of Kut secured for us the whole of the Basra Province, and with the command of the rivers made our position completely unassailable except by an immensely superior force accompanied by heavy artillery. By this time we had 'shot our bolt.' General Townshend realised that the quality of the troops against him was vastly superior to any he had encountered in previous battles, and our shortage of both land and river transport was a source of grave anxiety. The burning question now to decide was whether we should consolidate our position and remain at Kut, or proceed 178 miles by river beyond Kut, fight the Turks at Ctesiphon, and march into Baghdad. General Nixon was in favour of the advance, but General Townshend considered that a grave risk was being run in continuing the advance on Baghdad with only his weak division, and that if the Government desired to occupy Baghdad, then methodical advance from Kut by road by two divisions was absolutely necessary unless great risk was to be incurred.

"It was evident that Sir John Nixon intended me to make a dash for Baghdad with my present inadequate force, and it seemed to me that it was useless to try and argue with him any longer."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 'My Campaign in Mesopotamia.' By General Townshend.

## ADVANCE TO BAGHDAD APPROVED

Meanwhile, Sir John Nixon wired to the Government of India that he considered he was strong enough to open the road to Baghdad, and with that intention he was concentrating at Aziziya. There was now much discussion, both in India and at home, the general opinion in the first instance being strongly opposed to any advance beyond Kut. General Nixon, however, never deviated from his opinion that the road was open, and the capture of Baghdad feasible, provided he had sufficient reinforcements sent to him to hold what he had captured. He believed he could overcome the transport difficulty, and that once established in Baghdad the shortage in river transport would not be felt ; indeed such was his optimism that he even anticipated evacuating his wounded to Baghdad. Finally, opinion veered round in favour of Sir John Nixon's proposals, and on the 23rd October he was informed officially that if he were satisfied that his available force was sufficient, he might march to Baghdad : that two divisions would be sent to him as soon as possible, but they would take time to despatch. No consideration seems to have been given to the almost insuperable difficulties to be encountered in conveying two divisions, with equipment, stores, guns, and land transport, the 500 miles between Basra and Baghdad, nor was any estimate made of the probable date of their arrival at Basra. At home enthusiasm prevailed, and Mr Asquith

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

(the Prime Minister), speaking in the House of Commons on the 2nd November, said :—

“ General Nixon’s force is now within measurable distance of Baghdad. I do not think that in the whole course of the war there has been a series of operations more carefully contrived, more brilliantly conducted, and with a better prospect of final success.”

The die was cast, and after six weeks’ preparation at Aziziya, 102 miles above Kut (during which period the Turks were also making their preparations for defence), the order to advance was given on the 19th November, and by the 21st the force with its shipping was concentrated at Lajj, on the left bank of the Tigris. There was a great shortage of land transport ; and although there were at the time 2000 transport mules and many carts waiting at Basra, there was no river transport to convey them to the front.

On the 22nd November at Ctesiphon, 463 miles by river from Basra and 35 miles from Baghdad, the fiercest battle of the campaign was fought, and the gallant 6th Division met with the disaster foreseen by General Townshend. The Turkish Army, after its defeat at Kut, had been able to establish itself in a strong position at Ctesiphon, with a double line of defence ; also large reinforcements, unknown to General Townshend, had been brought on to the scene. The Turks’ first line of defence had been carried

## BATTLE OF CTESIPHON

after severe fighting, which lasted the whole day ; but having sustained 4500 casualties out of a total of 12,000 men engaged, and with a much superior force of Turks still in front of him, General Townshend had to abandon all idea of reaching Baghdad, and, fighting a rearguard action all the way, the General and his depleted division arrived back at Kut-al-Amara on the 3rd December, where by the 7th December they were completely invested by the Turkish Army.

The medical arrangements, which were defective at the battle of Kut, now completely broke down, with tragic results to the unfortunate wounded. The number of casualties had been under-estimated ; there was a shortage of medical personnel, food, tents, blankets, hot water, and any kind of comfort ; whilst in the absence of hospital ships the wounded were packed as close as they could be packed on the uncleaned decks of river steamers.

“ The following night was for many one of supreme agony, for all one of misery. The wounded were collected in springless mule-carts, whose progress over the rough ground evoked from their occupants cries and groans of agony, which struck horror into their surviving comrades. Most of them had been without water all day, and were chilled to the bone with the cold night breeze. The four field ambulances were equipped to deal with 400 casualties ; they had to cope that day with almost ten times that number. Two days were occupied in re-

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

moving the casualties to the waiting steamers, on which they were crowded, unmurmuring, like cattle.”<sup>1</sup>

Sir John Nixon, in a telegram dated 7th December, stated :—

“ The medical arrangements, under circumstances of considerable difficulty, worked splendidly.”

And on the 8th December the Secretary of State for India, in reply to a question in the House of Commons, said :—

“ The condition of the wounded is very satisfactory, and the medical arrangements have worked well under difficult conditions.”

He added :—

“ I am unwilling to give the House any information as to the accuracy of which I cannot absolutely vouch.”

Sir John Nixon returned to Basra after the battle, there to work out plans for General Townshend's relief.

<sup>1</sup> Sir Arnold Wilson in “ Loyalties.”

## CHAPTER II.

SIR JOHN NIXON'S attention had been directed for some time to the difficulty of maintaining communications with the garrison of Nasiriya, which in the low-water season was practically isolated, while the tribes, far from being placated, were showing signs of hostility, especially since the failure to capture Baghdad. General Nixon had ordered from Bombay two large dredgers with which he proposed to dig a fifteen-mile channel across the Hammar Lake, and he also hoped to use them for deepening the bar at the mouth of the Shatt-el-Arab River. I was in Rangoon at the time, and received a letter dated 2nd August 1915 from Commander Hamilton, R.I.M., who had been a fellow passenger with me the previous August in the *Ballarat*. Hamilton was now Senior Marine Transport Officer at Basra, and he said these dredgers were on their way up from India. He described the work they had to do and the urgency of improving the Hammar Lake channel, but added ingenuously that he did not know whether they were the right kind of dredgers ; in fact, dredging

was a subject he knew nothing about, and he asked for my advice. I replied warning him of the danger of promiscuous dredging without previous study, and volunteered to take leave from Rangoon and go to Basra to advise him. I received a reply dated 10th September thanking me, and saying Sir John Nixon had gone into the matter with interest, but says :—

“That he does not think the time has yet come to take up the permanent improvement of the waterways, but that your remarks and offer will be borne in mind if the question is, as it may be, considered later.”

I did not understand Sir John Nixon's remarks, as there was no question of permanently improving the waterways, and the matter dropped so far as I was concerned.

The fact that dredging operations were contemplated on the Shatt-el-Arab seems, however, to have come to the knowledge of the Admiralty, because on the 21st September the Secretary of State for India telegraphed to the Viceroy saying that he had been informed privately by the Admiralty that to undertake dredging operations on the Shatt without the best expert advice would be dangerous, and before any action was taken it would appear advisable to send up Buchanan. This was passed on to Sir John Nixon with the request that no dredging operations be undertaken before my arrival, and



## DEPARTURE FOR BOMBAY

elicited the reply from General Nixon that he did not propose to carry out dredging below Qurna, and he must beg for no interference with his discretion in carrying out work connected with military operations.

I was in Rangoon in ignorance of the controversy that was proceeding, but on the 21st November, when I was in the club, the Chief Secretary to the Government of Burma came up and told me that a clear-the-line telegram had just been received from the Government of India asking me to proceed at once to Mesopotamia to advise on dredging operations on the Shatt-el-Arab River.

Details were soon settled, an Acting Chairman of the Port Trust appointed, and I left Rangoon for Bombay on the 30th November, little knowing that I was never to return again in the same capacity. I had spent fifteen happy years in Rangoon, and my work was there for anyone to see. The river training works were completed, the new port had been built complete with wharves and warehouses, and every department of the port had been reorganised ; the ordinary port revenue had increased during my term of office from £78,000 to £345,000, and the value of trade from 15½ million pounds to 38½ million pounds. I left the port in a healthy condition, and it was for my successors to continue the work.

I arrived at Bombay in the afternoon of Sunday, the 5th December, and called at once

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

on the Director of Indian Marine (Captain Lumsden, R.N.), but was unable to see him until the following day, when I found a letter from the Government of India awaiting me, stating that the object of my deputation to Mesopotamia was to advise General Sir John Nixon in regard to dredging work in the theatre of operations under his control, and that on arrival at Basra I was to report my arrival to Sir John Nixon, from whom instructions as to my course of action would be received. After studying such data as was available in the office of the Director, I discussed the situation with Captain Lumsden and officers, and finally expressed the considered opinion that the two pipe-line dredgers purchased from the Bombay Port Trust at a cost of £50,000, exclusive of freight and new pipe-line, were not of the slightest use in Mesopotamia; that under the circumstances my visit would be a waste of time and money, and that it seemed desirable for me to go at once to Army Headquarters at Delhi to report. To this arrangement Delhi gave their consent, and I received an invitation to stay in Delhi with H.E. the Viceroy (Lord Hardinge). I left Bombay at once, and on the 10th December had a conference at Army Headquarters with the Chief of the General Staff (Sir Percy Lake) and the Director of Military Operations (General Kirkpatrick). Neither of these officers had visited Mesopotamia, nor did they have a clear idea of

## DREDGERS FOR HAMMAR LAKE

what was going on, apart from actual military operations. The urgent necessity from a military point of view for dredging a channel fifteen miles long across the Hammar Lake was explained to me, also the desirability of dredging a deeper channel across the bar at the mouth of the Shatt-el-Arab River. I gathered that all matters connected with river transport and dredging were dealt with by the Marine Department of the Government of India, the sub-department actually responsible being that of the Director of Indian Marine, Bombay, and had I been able to fall in with that officer's views my visit to Delhi would have been unnecessary. I pointed out that to dredge a channel fifteen miles long was a job of considerable magnitude, and that it seemed to me it would be quicker to build a railway; but that if the river route was considered preferable, then efficient dredgers must be obtained, as those now lying in the river at Basra were quite useless because, apart from their lacking equipment, they required fourteen feet depth of water in which to work, and although it would be possible to hack a channel fifteen miles long and fourteen feet deep (six feet being the maximum required), the time required, apart from the expense, placed the project outside practical politics. The dredgers were also useless for dredging the Shatt-el-Arab bar, and in any case before any such work could be begun a proper marine survey and a study of local con-

ditions was necessary. The staff seemed rather upset at my blunt remarks, and in peace-time would probably have called in another expert. I do not know what was the end of the unfortunate dredgers; their pipe-line pontoons were removed for military bridging purposes, and they remained a melancholy sight anchored in the river above Basra. I had next to see General Sir Beauchamp Duff, the Commander-in-Chief in India, and to him I suggested that it would be much easier and quicker to build a light railway across the desert between Basra and Nasiriya than dredge a channel fifteen miles long; but Sir Beauchamp Duff replied that a railway had been considered and rejected as impracticable, because the line would be constantly cut by marauding Arabs, and further, there were grave financial objections.

After further talk with the General Staff I wrote a report on river conservancy work as an aid to military operations in Mesopotamia, and emphasised the fact that however urgent the work might be it was humanly impossible to improve a river without some preliminary surveys and studies. For this purpose a survey party was necessary, complete with launches, boats, surveying appliances, and instruments, and as these were ready to hand in Rangoon I proposed to return at once to Burma and personally supervise the collection of men, materials, and plant. At the same time as the Burma

Government had in use on a canal project three dredgers eminently suitable for dredging the Hammar Lake, one of these might be requisitioned and despatched to Basra.

At Viceregal Lodge I found Lord Hardinge keenly interested in my proposals, and as he had himself visited Mesopotamia and discussed river transport questions on the spot, I found him able to appreciate the position. Whilst in Delhi I called at his request on Sir William Meyer, the Finance Minister, and on my asking him why financial sanction was withheld for the construction of the Nasiriya railway, he replied that if the Commander-in-Chief had asked for the railway as an urgent military necessity, funds would at once have been provided ; but Sir John Nixon had put forward the scheme as a semi-commercial proposition, which naturally did not come under the category of urgent military works.

At my next conference with the General Staff all the suggestions made in my report were approved, and we passed on to discussing the great delay in discharging ocean transports, the shortage of river transport, and kindred subjects. I then suggested that my very considerable experience in port management and organisation might be utilised at Basra, where it seemed obvious that someone with expert knowledge was required. This idea was welcomed by Sir Percy Lake, the C.G.S., and after receiving

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

the full approval of the Viceroy and the Commander-in-Chief, it was agreed that I should give all possible assistance to General Sir John Nixon in every matter connected with the port of Basra and rivers of Mesopotamia. The last debatable subject was the date of my departure and whether I should in the first instance return to Burma to collect staff and materials. On the morning of the 16th December I was told that I should return to Rangoon, but at 11 o'clock that the Commander-in-Chief wished me to proceed at once to Basra. At 12.30 the order was reversed, but by the evening it was finally settled that I was to go to Basra by the first available steamer.

On the 17th December I received a letter of instructions from the Government of India in the following terms :—

“ It has been decided that you should proceed to Basra at the earliest opportunity in order that you may be in a position to give immediate assistance to General Sir John Nixon, K.C.B., in all matters connected with the port of Basra, its administration, engineering works, and river conservancy. Your designation will be ‘ Director-General of Port Administration and River Conservancy,’ but the exact delimitation of your duties will be fixed by Sir John Nixon in consultation with you, the Government of India being informed of the decision arrived at.”

I was also requested to prepare, before leaving

## EMBARK FOR BASRA

India, a statement in detail of my exact requirements in plant, personnel, and equipment, which would be dealt with by the Government of India direct. My rank was to be that of a Colonel on the staff. The next day or two was occupied in preparing detailed lists and specifications for the complete equipment of a small self-contained survey party, and I proposed to appoint the surveyors and other men from my Rangoon staff. I further asked that one of the Burma Government dredgers be requisitioned and sent to Basra with all possible speed, complete with all necessary equipment, boats, and launches.

On the 21st December I left Delhi for Bombay by the Punjab mail, and on arrival at Bombay I called on the Director of Indian Marine and ascertained that a cabin had been reserved for me in the transport *Edavana* sailing on the 25th December. My next duty was to visit a military outfitter and order my uniforms, boots, belts, and other accoutrements, less a sword, which I had been informed was unnecessary ; and on the 25th December I, who had never worn a military uniform in my life, discarded with trembling hands my civilian garments and sallied forth from my hotel in khaki, complete with badges of rank and scarlet tabs. I was the senior officer in the transport, but thankful that I was not made O.C. troops, and I managed to comport myself with sufficient dignity and to return salutes with sufficient solemnity to conceal

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

my incompetence as a soldier. We had 1421 troops on board, details for various regiments, 22 officers, and a number of horses and camels, and on the 31st December 1915, at noon, we arrived at the Shatt-el-Arab lightship, took on a pilot, and anchored near the bar. Lying near was H.M.S. *Espiegle*, the flagship of the Senior Naval Officer, and he signalled O.C. troops that all on board would probably be sent to the front within a few hours of arrival. It was very cold, and I put on my thick serge jacket and British warm.

We landed in the morning and heard that the reinforcements for the relief of Kut expedition were already on their way up the Tigris. Two Indian divisions, the 5th and 7th, were on their way from France, and as my son was a subaltern in the 2nd Black Watch with the 7th Division, my first act was to enquire if they had arrived, and I was told they had landed the previous day and been sent straight up the line to the front.

I made my first call at the Port Office, where I saw Captain Huddleston, the Principal Marine Transport Officer, who, in addition to his port duties, controlled the whole of the transport system both from the sea to Basra and from Basra up the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates. I found Captain Huddleston under the impression that I had come up as one of his subordinates to advise him on questions of dredging, so after



## MEETING WITH GENERAL COWPER

a little general conversation I left him and proceeded to G.H.Q., where I introduced myself to General Cowper, the D.A. and Q.M.G. of the Force. This officer was very busy and pre-occupied, and unable to talk consecutively on any one subject, a failing which I found later was characteristic of him. I showed him my letter of instructions from the Government of India, which greatly surprised both him and Captain Huddleston, who had followed me to G.H.Q. General Cowper appeared puzzled at the words River Conservancy, and asked if it had anything to do with Sanitation. That, however, was a common mistake, as later on I received a letter from an infuriated officer commanding me to remove immediately the body of a dead mule from the banks of the river.

General Cowper then retired to confer with General Sir John Nixon, who made an appointment to see me the following Monday. I then asked General Cowper where I was to live and where my office and staff were to be accommodated, but getting no satisfactory reply I returned to the transport and requested the Captain to allow me to remain on board for a few days. A number of officers were in the same plight, and were most indignant because no one had met them from the Base Commandant's office with orders, and there was no rest-camp for officers.

The following day I again called on General

Cowper, who suggested that I should be allotted quarters on an Austrian prize-steamer, the *Franz Ferdinand*, which had been converted into a sort of cheap boarding-house for junior officers of the Royal Indian Marine and was moored in the stream. I objected to this on the ground that I should be marooned and only able to go on board or leave the ship at certain fixed times, so the matter again dropped. I then returned to my transport, and in the afternoon General Rimington, the B.G.R.E., called with a motor launch and took me for a short tour five miles up the river and back. He also very kindly offered me a room in the house occupied by himself and the Deputy Director, Military Services, an offer which I thankfully accepted.

On Monday, the 3rd January 1916, I reported myself at G.H.Q. at 10 o'clock for my interview with General Sir John Nixon. There were also present General Cowper and Captain Huddleston, and I at once sensed trouble ahead. After the usual greetings General Nixon said he did not understand what was meant by the title "Director-General of Port Administration," there being no port to administer, and any landing stages or jetties were purely for military purposes. The only use to which my services could be put was to see what improvements, if any, could be effected on the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates to assist military operations. He had no intention of dredging the bar at Fao or any-

where else below Basra, and did not understand what the Admiralty were frightened about. It was annoying that the dredgers which had been brought up from India were useless, but these mistakes would occur. He then read out a long list of duties which I was *not* to carry out, thus making it clear that I was to have nothing whatever to do with the port.

I explained the meaning of Port Administration and pointed out that a military port required management of traffic and execution of works as much as a purely commercial port, but Sir John dissented, and said all he wanted me for was to improve, if possible, navigation conditions on the Tigris and across the Hammar Lake. I, therefore, said that as I could be of no use in Basra, and had already been told there was no launch available in which I could inspect the rivers, I might as well return to Bombay; but here General Cowper intervened, and said I must have a launch for a preliminary tour to the Hammar Lake and up the Tigris, and it was evident that, having arrived, I was not to be allowed to leave the country. I then departed, General Nixon having made it clear that he regarded me as a nuisance. The interview lasted less than fifteen minutes, and I never saw Sir John Nixon again.

Subsequently I received a letter, dated 5th January, from the D.A. and Q.M.G. detailing the points on which my advice and assistance

were required, and adding to Sir John Nixon's order advice on construction of certain wharves and jetties. He emphasised the fact that there was no question of port administration as understood in India or elsewhere; and although it would be desirable to consider schemes for the establishment of such at the conclusion of peace, no such question meanwhile could be allowed to impinge on the military necessities of the present situation, or to interfere in any way with the work and duties of the Principal Marine Transport Officer. Finally, I was told that it would be necessary for me to make all arrangements for equipment and personnel in regard to any work I might have to undertake, and that, owing to the existing paucity of river craft of all descriptions, and of the constant use of the same for military requirements, it would not at present be possible to afford me any assistance from this source of supply.

I replied regretting that my experience could not be utilised for military purposes, and requested that the correspondence be sent to the Government of India for their information.

I cannot altogether blame Sir John Nixon for his hostile attitude. He had his own professional advisers in the D.A. and Q.M.G. and the P.M.T.O., whilst I, an unknown civilian, had been thrust upon him by the Government of India without his knowledge or consent. He wanted a dredging master, not a port administrator. When, how-

## BASE REQUIREMENTS

ever, Sir John Nixon remarked that no question of port administration could be allowed to impinge on the military necessities of the situation or to interfere in any way with the work and duties of the Principal Marine Transport Officer, he entirely overlooked the fact that the military situation itself called for the very best port administration; in no previous case had such an enormous force been landed and maintained without an adequately prepared base at an established port. In South Africa, France, Egypt, and India there were well-equipped ports, but at Basra there was only an anchorage, a river bank, and beyond—a swamp.

A parallel case was possibly Gallipoli, but that was a temporary occupation under unusual circumstances. The result was that at Basra, owing to the magnitude of military operations, a huge ocean shipping and river steamer business had been created without any of the usual facilities for the proper conduct of the same. Sir John Nixon himself was unacquainted with the principles of base formation and transport organisation on such a large scale, and he was badly served. The whole of the transport arrangements, including the working of the port, were in the hands of officers of the Royal Indian Marine, and the P.M.T.O. was a senior commander in that service. The experience of these officers was confined in peace-time to navigating the transports owned by the Indian Government

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

for trooping purposes, the navigation of small steamers on the Indian rivers and along the coasts, and a certain amount of shore work, but they had no practical knowledge of port traffic, port engineering, dredging, or river conservancy.

The P.M.T.O. must have known his limitations and should have welcomed my assistance, but he was too stubborn to admit his ignorance. Sir Arnold Wilson sums up the matter in a few lines :—

“At Basra much precious time had been wasted. Sir George Buchanan, an engineer with great administrative experience, had been kicking his heels at Basra since 1st January, prevented by departmental jealousies from undertaking reorganisation on comprehensive lines.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “‘Loyalties,’ Mesopotamia, 1914-1917.’ By Sir Arnold Wilson.

### CHAPTER III.

I NOW settled down at Pilgrim House, so called because a pilgrim was supposed to be buried there. Here, in a brick two-storey building with a central courtyard, were quartered General Rimington, B.G.R.E., Surgeon-General Hathaway, D.D.M.S., two staff officers, and myself. We lived on the upper storey, and below was General Hathaway's office and servants. My room was very small and dirty, with rough brick walling and a mat ceiling, but I obtained a table and two chairs from the S. & T. Department, and with my camp-bed and canvas bath I had all I wanted, and was only too thankful to have escaped being marooned in the *Franz Ferdinand*. Surgeon-General Hathaway had arrived in Mesopotamia when the status of the Force was raised to that of an Army Corps; he had made a reputation in South Africa, which he did not maintain in Mesopotamia. He was with General Nixon and the Headquarter Staff at the battle of Ctesiphon, and gave me an interesting account of their escape. They were on the steamer *Malamir* waiting below Ctesiphon

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

with the expectation of advancing with General Townshend and hoisting the Union Jack at Baghdad. Then came the debacle and General Townshend's retreat, so the *Malamir* took on wounded and retired down the river as hard as she could go ; but when past Kut and making for Amara they were attacked by a small force of Turks and Arabs, with whom they had a battle, in which all the Generals and Colonels of the Headquarter Staff took part, many of whom had forgotten how to use a rifle. Ultimately they managed to get through, and arrived at Basra on the 6th December ; but with a little more enterprise the Turks might have captured General Nixon and staff. General Hathaway admitted that the condition of the wounded was bad, but defended his department by saying the wounded had to be got away by any means, and if they were shoved on a steamer head downwards they should be thankful.

Brig.-General J. C. Rimington was an exceedingly capable and energetic Royal Engineer. He knew very little about wharves or docks, but was always ready to help me in every possible way. He was commanding at Kut when the retirement from Ctesiphon took place, and he told me he had strongly advised General Townshend against halting there, as it was certain he would be surrounded by the enemy.

I was now at a loose end, with an official title which meant nothing, and no possibility



## INSPECTION OF PORT

of even beginning the work which General Nixon had allotted to me until the arrival of my survey party and equipment from Burma. Although not a professional soldier, I had always understood that an army advancing into a hostile country depended for the success of military operations on the efficiency of (a) the base, (b) the line of communications, and (c) the transport system; so I decided to occupy my time by investigating so far as possible the conditions under these heads. I began by inspecting the base and port of Basra, and in this was greatly helped by General Rimington, who took me about in his motor launch and discussed the difficulties of the situation. The chaos was pitiable; the small original Force had required little base accommodation, but unfortunately when the Force expanded there was no corresponding base expansion or forward planning, and the various departments—Supply and Transport, Ordnance, Engineer Field Park, Marine Transport, and others—who had originally dumped themselves on any dry spot, had simply expanded for a distance of nearly two miles along the front. A few additional small jetties had been built on the foreshore, which, although sufficient in an emergency for landing troops and stores, should have been replaced long ago by proper floating pontoon landing stages. A number of mat sheds had been erected on the bank for storage purposes, which, being of an

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

inflammable nature, should have been replaced by corrugated iron. The day I made my inspection there had been heavy rain, and the whole of the camp area was a huge quagmire, with rotting stores dumped here, there, and everywhere. At Ma'qil matters were even worse ; some temporary jetties, which reminded me of a Heath Robinson cartoon, had been erected, from which ocean steamers were to discharge their cargoes, and as there had been heavy rain, the entire camp area was flooded, and horses, mules, troops, and guns had ploughed up the ground until it was liquid mud fifteen inches deep. Troops were arriving at the time in large numbers to go to the front, General Keary and staff of the Lahore Division were embarking in a river boat, and fourteen transports filled with men, guns, and material were waiting in the stream to be discharged. Many of the store-ships waited a month to six weeks before discharge began, thus adding enormously to freight and demurrage charges, besides occupying tonnage urgently required elsewhere. Troops for the front were generally landed at Ma'qil, but all store-ships were discharged in the stream opposite the depots, and the clumsy, unsuitable native *mahaila* was used to convey the goods from ship to shore. A *mahaila* carrying twenty to seventy tons was loaded by the ship's gear and then taken to a small jetty and unloaded by hand, as there was not a crane in the port.

## BOMBAY DREDGERS

In the course of my inspection I noticed huge stacks of wood of all shapes and sizes piled on the foreshore, and said I supposed they were for fuelling the river steamers. "Oh, no," replied the officer with me, "that is fuel rations for the troops, and as there is no fuel in Mesopotamia, ship after ship arrives from Bombay laden entirely with firewood." It seemed strange to me that it never occurred to anyone in Bombay that there would have been a great saving in freight, transport up the line, and human labour, if the wood had been cut up in India into suitable sizes and tied into, say, 80-lb. bundles.

I then went to see the £50,000 dredgers and found on board two very disgruntled dredging masters and engineers. The dredgers had not been worked for several years, and previously had done four years' hard work in Bombay; so, even had they been of a suitable type, they were clearly unfit for any work in Mesopotamia without a complete overhaul. This was suggested to the Bombay Authorities by the engineers, but they were told they would get everything they required in Basra.

At the end of my inspection of the base I came to the conclusion that I had never before in my life seen such a hopeless mess and muddle, and I wondered if it were the usual accompaniment of war. It seemed to me incredible that we should have been in occupation of Basra for over a year, so very little had been done in that time

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

towards the improvement of the base and the organisation of the port.

What was required, in spite of General Nixon's protests and denials, was expert civilian port administration and engineering. Officers of the Indian Marine and staff embarkation officers were amateurs at the game. The authorities had not even made use of the men on the spot, or my chief traffic manager from Rangoon, Mr E. H. Keeling (now M.P. for Twickenham), would not have been shut up in Kut, but would have been doing the job at which he was an expert; and one of my best Rangoon pilots would have been helping in the port instead of galloping about at Ctesiphon in the uniform of a cavalry officer.

Immediately it was decided that the Force was to advance above Basra, plans should have been prepared for deep-water wharves at which transports could go alongside, equipped with cranes and large corrugated iron sheds for the storage of goods. An area of ground should have been reclaimed to well above flood areas, and concrete or metalled roads constructed. A civilian traffic manager should have been put in uniform (if necessary) and given control of transports, tallying of cargo, and distribution of same to the various departments.

Ultimately, all my recommendations were carried out, but meanwhile very much valuable time was lost. Such was the prejudice against

## CONGESTION AT BASRA

employing civilian experts where anything to do with 'war' was concerned, that in Bombay, where the Bombay Port Trust had a large and experienced staff, all the work connected with the loading and discharging of transports, embarkation of troops and animals, was entrusted to officers of the Indian Marine and Military, the result being that Bombay was often as chaotic as Basra. In this connection the report of the Mesopotamia Commission has the following cogent remark :—

“ It is clear that management of the traffic of a port and discharge of cargo was not work to which officers of the Royal Indian Marine had previously been accustomed. They found themselves at Basra with a task on hand of which they had no experience, with an inadequate and inexperienced staff and shortage of labour, a port where the facilities ashore were of the most meagre description and where traffic was constantly increasing and congestion becoming greater. We are told that at one time there were forty steamers waiting to discharge, and that they lay in a line eight miles long up and down the river. Small wonder that arrangements broke down despite the willing efforts of the officer in charge. Much of the difficulty could have been avoided, in our opinion, if, from the first, someone accustomed to traffic management of a commercial port, and the handling of cargoes, had been appointed to assist. Men with these qualifications were known to be employed in one or other of the great Indian and Burmese river ports. Their advice was not asked for

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

and their assistance was not utilised until more than a year after the landing of the Expedition in Mesopotamia, when conditions at Basra had become serious."

I next took in hand a study of the line of communications, and although it was some time before I was able to go up the line myself, I obtained a great deal of information from General Rimington, the Senior Naval Officer (Captain Nunn, R.N.), the officers of the old Tigris Navigation Company, all of whom were serving with the Force, the Persian Gulf Pilot, and Sir William Willcock's books on the irrigation of Mesopotamia.

The line of communication may almost be said to have begun at Bombay, from which port departed nearly all transports and store-ships, and after four to six days' steaming the mouth of the Shatt-el-Arab was reached. The Shatt is not a true river, but is the name given to the channel through which the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates flow to the sea from their junction at Qurna 108 miles up-stream. At the mouth of the Shatt was a bar, where vessels, exceeding a draught of nineteen feet at spring tides or seventeen feet at neaps, had to stop and discharge a portion of their cargo into barges or lighter draught steamers brought from Basra; and as transshipping in a fairway is attended by considerable risk, the deep-draught vessel often went to the port of Koweit, some sixty miles in a south-westerly direction, where there was

## LINES OF COMMUNICATION

a sheltered bay with deep water and a fifty-ton shear-legs, which was useful for discharging launches and barges brought up on deck from Bombay. Transshipping caused great delay and expense, especially when Bombay sent up several deep-draught vessels loaded with stone metal for the Basra roads, and several thousand tons had to be discharged by hand and transhipped at Koweit. Forty miles up the river, on the east bank, lay Abadan, the port and works of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, and five miles higher the Persian town of Mohammerah was reached, where the River Karun flowed into the Shatt, and, at certain times of the year, a rather troublesome bar was formed in the fairway. At Basra, sixty-seven miles from the mouth of the Shatt, there were the makings of a fine port, with a stretch of water 1500 feet broad and 40 to 50 feet deep. Here the ocean transports completed their journey and gave way to the river steamers and country craft ; and at Qurna, forty-six miles above Basra, at the junction of the Tigris and old Euphrates, began the great difficulties encountered on the line of communication. From Basra to Baghdad the country is one vast, roadless, treeless plain, through which flow the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates, treacherous and unharnessed, at one time of the year so full of water that the whole surrounding country is flooded, and at other times so empty that only vessels of light draught can make a passage.

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

Both rivers have their origin in the Armenian mountains, and floods are caused, not by excessive rainfall, of which there falls less than eight inches per annum, but by the melting of the snows in the mountains. Winter rains keep water in the rivers at a fair level during January and February; then, with the melting of the snow in early March, come three months high river and floods, after which the level of the water falls continuously, and from August to the end of October navigation difficulties are at their worst. It is unfortunate for military purposes that the time of rainfall (November to March) coincides with the cool weather, as the rain generally occurs in sudden and violent storms, which convert the sandy loam into a thick tenacious mud sufficient to bring to a standstill for the time being all movements of men and animals. The River Tigris from Baghdad to Qurna flowed within well-defined banks, and in 1837, at the date of the Chesney expedition, the Euphrates also flowed in one deep channel from Suk-esh-Sheyuk past Chabaish to Qurna, where it joined the Tigris, the two rivers forming the Shatt-el-Arab River. About 1840 the Euphrates, overloaded with spill-water from the Tigris, burst its right bank, with dire results. The tribes were at that time in a state of anarchy, the Turks did nothing, so the breach widened until for a length of fifteen miles a vast shallow lake (the Hammar) was formed where there had



## THE SHU'AIBA BUND

once been a navigable river, and the bulk of the Euphrates water found an outlet at Garmat Ali, five miles above Basra.

In flood-time the alluvial plain between Basra and Zubair was always under water, and at the battle of Shu'aiba, when the Turks made a fierce attempt to recover Basra, all our reinforcements and supplies had to be conveyed by native boats through the ten miles of water separating Basra from the fighting force. This flooding had to be stopped, and when I arrived at Basra the ten-mile-long Shu'aiba Bund was nearing completion. The construction of this embankment is graphically described in Sir Hubert Young's book, 'The Independent Arab.' Thousands of men were employed throwing up a mud embankment, which, naturally, would not stand up against the flood-waters, and, finally, the waterside, for the whole length of ten miles, was lined with galvanised iron sheets imported from India.

On both the rivers navigation was most difficult and at times impossible. On the Tigris in flood season there was abundance of water, but a current running from four to six knots caused the best of steamers to proceed up-river at a crawl. In the low-water season three feet six inches was the maximum draught practicable, and between Qurna and Amara the river for many miles was not much better than a ditch, with breadth between banks so narrow that two

steamers towing barges on either side could not pass each other, and with such numerous twists and turns that, going down-stream, a vessel deliberately bumped into one bank, so as to cannon off into the next reach. Groundings were frequent, and, if in a bad spot, all traffic was held up. Between Amara and Kut (150 miles) the river was broader, but the numerous shoals and lack of defined channels made navigation troublesome. The distance between Qurna and Kut in a direct line was 183 miles, but by the river 239 miles. On the retreat from Ctesiphon there had been great difficulty in getting the steamers and barges down the river due to the constant groundings. The distance between Ctesiphon and Kut was, as the troops marched, ninety miles, but by the river 178 miles. On the Euphrates, between Qurna and Nasiriya, the distance was eight-seven miles, fifteen of which were through the Hammar Lake, where in the dry season there was only twelve inches of water. To add to the difficulties on the line of communication, the Arabs were always on the watch to loot barges which had grounded on the shoals, and to cut the throats of any defenceless men left in charge.

General Townshend was not exaggerating when he said that he had ever found the Arabs merciless and cowardly scoundrels. On the battlefields they attacked the side they thought was losing, irrespective of whether they were British or Turk,

## SHORTAGE OF RIVER CRAFT

cut the throats and stripped the wounded, dug up the graves for the sake of the khaki clothing, and generally behaved like jackals and vultures. There was not in Mesopotamia the usual safety one expects behind the front line. My survey parties were always accompanied by an armed guard, the dredgers had to be protected with iron plates from snipers' bullets and have a permanent guard living on board, and whenever I went up the line on inspection duty I had a guard on board my stern-wheeler and could never go ashore without an escort of four or five sepoy with rifles.

I had now got a good idea on paper of the difficulties along the line of communication, and I was anxious to make a personal inspection as soon as possible and set my staff at work making surveys, but in the absence of transport I could do nothing.

Lastly, I went into the matter of river transport, and there was no lack of evidence of the deplorable shortage. For the first two years of the campaign the available tonnage of river craft was so hopelessly inadequate that it is admitted that the failure to relieve General Townshend at Kut was primarily due to the lack of river craft to take to the front reinforcements of men, munitions, materials, and stores. In the absence of any roads or railways, the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates were for a long time the sole means of communication between Basra and the front lines.

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

The Army, and everything the Army required—men, guns, ammunition, carts, mules, horses, camels, fodder, S. and T. Supplies, and stores of every description—had to be conveyed up these difficult rivers by river craft, and at Kut-al-Amara the length of the line of communication was 285 miles, and at Ctesiphon 463 miles from Basra. In May 1915 the Force comprised two divisions with divisional troops and a cavalry brigade; the line of communication was forty-six miles long from the base, and the river transport consisted of eleven paddle-steamers (of which seven could only travel above Qurna in the low-water season), three stern-wheelers, and nine light-draught tugs for towing barges.

In January 1916 the Force had been increased to three, and later four divisions, exclusive of the division locked up in Kut. The line of communication extended to 250 miles in length on the Tigris and 134 on the Euphrates, and the number of river steamers remained the same as in May 1915. A number of sailing *mahailas* had been hired from the Arabs, each of which carried twenty-five to thirty-five tons and were towed up-stream at the rate of ten miles per day. Military works had also just completed bridging the main creeks, and troops were marching in echelon along the banks of the Tigris when it was possible for them to do so.

Sir George MacMunn in an article contributed to the 'Army Quarterly,' on the lines of com-

munication in Mesopotamia, tersely describes the situation :—

“ But now was to fall on the heads of General Nixon and General Aylmer the Nemesis of an attempt to pour more troops into a port and to a line of communication than those organisations could possibly carry. It was almost impossible to disembark the reinforcing troops, now amounting to close on four divisions. It was quite impossible to get them up-country or to supply them when there. But Kut was crying out that it was starving, and General Aylmer could not resist the call. The result was that three divisions were scattered for 250 miles up the banks of the Tigris, marching by detachments along the banks, drinking its foul water, struggling through mud and swamp, or clinging to the decks of crowded steamers and barges. There were no hospital steamers, there was little hospital accommodation, there was but scanty medical personnel. But troops and guns had to be got to the front, and get to some extent they did, dropping on the way all formations and components save bayonets and a portion of the guns. Ambulances and adequate artillery ammunition or anything but the barest subsistence scale of rations were out of the question.”

The position was fatuous, and desperation stage had been reached ; further, as there were no proper facilities for repairing vessels, breakdowns were constant, and the fleet was becoming less efficient every day. The Governments both of India and at home were now thoroughly

aroused. Six of the Thames penny steamers were requisitioned and despatched. Ten Nile steamers were sent off from Egypt; Indian rivers were being scoured in search of suitable and unsuitable craft of any description, a great number of which sank *en route*, and steamers and most unsuitable barges were in course of construction in England; but alas, all these last hour endeavours were too late to save Kut.

The problem was a simple arithmetical one: (a) the requirements of the army at the front in tons per day, delivered where required, including extra steamers for special services; (b) the tonnage capacity of the river fleet and number of vessels available for all purposes; and if (a) exceeded (b) something unpleasant was bound to happen.

When I summed up these three factors, Base, Line of Communication, and Transport, although no soldier, I marvelled at the audacity of the authorities responsible for advancing so far as Kut-al-Amara, whilst to proceed farther, or to even dream of reaching Baghdad, seemed to invite the awful disaster that followed.

## CHAPTER IV.

THE Kut relief expedition was now under way and the Tigris Corps composed of two divisions from France (the 5th and 7th Indian Divisions) under the command of Lieutenant-General Sir Felix Aylmer, V.C., was concentrating at Ali-el-Gharbi, seventy-four miles below Kut. The position at Kut was supposed to be so serious that General Aylmer decided relief must be effected by the 10th January. The difficulties were enormous ; General Aylmer had no proper Corps Staff and the staff of the Indian Corps had not been sent with the two Indian divisions from France, nor had even the divisional staffs arrived with the troops. Owing to the shortage of river transport, units were hurried up the Tigris as they arrived at Basra, often without their full equipment and in advance of their brigade staffs, the medical and supply arrangements were inadequate, and there was considerable sickness before any fighting began. Lastly, land transport, except for first line equipment, was almost entirely lacking for want of river transport, as although the animals and carts might have marched part

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

of the way all the forage would have to go by river.

On the 7th January when the battle of Shaikh Sa'ad took place, General Keary and the staff of the 7th Division had just arrived at Basra with most of the Units of the division behind him.

Nevertheless, such stress was laid on the necessity for the immediate relief of Kut that General Aylmer gallantly advanced against the Turks, and at the battle of Shaikh Sa'ad met with a severe reverse. We heard in Basra that severe fighting was proceeding, and on the 10th January General Cowper showed me a casualty list giving the names of nineteen officers in the Black Watch who were killed or wounded, including among the latter, my son. On the following day it was stated that our casualties were over 4000, or 23 per cent of the effective strength, and General Hathaway, D.D.M.S., admitted in conversation the lack of adequate medical equipment, one reason being that the Lahore and Meerut Divisions had arrived without their medical units. He said he anticipated a row. On the 14th January I went to No. 3 British General Hospital to see Colonel Wauchope (now Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Wauchope), the C.O. 2nd Black Watch, who had been wounded with shrapnel in the shoulder. He was very bitter, and spoke in the strongest terms of the Higher Command, who had ordered his regiment to make a frontal attack on a plain as flat and as



## BLACK WATCH CASUALTIES

bare as a billiard-table without any artillery support. The regiment had marched twenty-three miles on the 6th January and five miles on the day of the battle ; the men were lying down without packs or equipment, when suddenly the order came to fall in and advance in artillery formation.

“ No time was given for the issue of orders, no frontage or direction was given, no signal communication was arranged, and to all inquiries the one answer was ‘ Advance where the bullets are thickest.’ ” <sup>1</sup>

This they did with such effect that, by the time the first line had advanced to within 300 yards of the Turkish trenches, the regiment had suffered over 500 casualties.

At lunch on Sunday, Major Cook Young, Indian Medical Service, arrived, straight from the front. He also commented on the bungling which had sacrificed the Black Watch, the Seaforths, and the Leicesters. He said that the Turkish trenches had not been properly located, and it was heart-breaking to see these three magnificent regiments, direct from France, ruthlessly slaughtered. He also gave a shocking account of the state of the wounded. He had come down, the only doctor in charge of over 500 wounded, all packed on to an iron barge, in bitter cold weather and without even the

<sup>1</sup> ‘ With a Highland Regiment in Mesopotamia.’

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

bare necessities of life. Major Young said he was ashamed of himself as a man, ashamed of himself as a doctor, and ashamed to look the miserable dying men in the face. I have never heard a more dreadful tale of preventable suffering.

The next day I heard that my son had arrived in hospital, and I went up to see him rather in fear after what I had heard from Major Young. He gave me a graphic account of the battle from his point of view. The regiment came under heavy shell-fire as soon as they advanced, followed by intense rifle-fire, which bowled over the men like rabbits; he started in the second-line supports and finished in the front line, with only two of his platoon left and the ground behind strewn with the dead and wounded. At 3.15 he reached the firing line and at 3.45 was shot in the side of the stomach, but the bullet instead of going through his body came out again a few inches higher up. He took some morphia, with which every officer was provided, and lay there until six, when it became dark. He then walked five miles to the dressing station, which he reached about 10 P.M. After receiving first field dressing he lay down in the desert for five days without food and men dying around him from neglect, and he then spent five days lying on the flooded deck of a paddle-steamer. It was thus ten days after he had been shot before he reached hospital, got his clothes off, and had his first field dressing attended to,

## SUFFERINGS OF WOUNDED

when, *mirabile dictu*, the two great wounds had nearly healed up.

“ At Shaikh Sa’ad we lost 4262 of General Aylmer’s column in this frontal attack upon the advanced trenches of the enemy, a force equal to half the garrison we were relieving ; 133 British officers fell in the action, but it is not the long roll of honour that lends bitterness to the thought of that unhappy day. It is the tragic memory of the wounded. Never since the Crimea can there have been such a collection of maimed and untended humanity in a British camp as were gathered on the Tigris bank on the night of 7th January. After fifteen months of the war there was not a hospital ship or barge on the river. Doctors, ambulances, medical equipment vital to the scene were following the Force in leisurely transports from France. The five field ambulances of the 7th Division were on the high seas ; while our casualties were over 4000, there was barely provision for 250 beds. . . . The stretchers ran short, there was one to 50 wounded. The regimental stretchers were taken away and not returned. Shattered limbs were laid on the jolting transport carts ; many must have died in them who might have been saved, yet these carts were tolerated in Mesopotamia as the normal ambulance conveyance for nearly two years.” <sup>1</sup>

After the battle of Shaikh Sa’ad the Turks withdrew to another strong position (the Wadi), seven miles up the river, and on the 13th January

<sup>1</sup> ‘ The Long Road to Baghdad.’ By Edmund Candler.

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

General Aylmer attacked with his whole force, and was again repulsed, this time with 1600 casualties, including 40 British officers. There had been heavy rain, the whole country was a sea of mud, and a number of the wounded dragged their way wearily along until they died of exhaustion and exposure.

These terrible battles were fought on the supposition that General Townshend could not hold out longer than 15th January, but on 22nd January he intimated that by putting his troops on half rations he could last until 18th February ; and, later, he said that by killing and eating his animals he could hold out until 17th April. Had this been known in the first instance what a difference it might have made in the campaign, because there would have been time to concentrate gradually a well-equipped and organised force instead of rushing up ill-equipped troops to be killed in detail.

The accumulative evidence of the horrible treatment of the wounded which reached us at Basra caused me grief but not surprise. I had seen the condition of the base, and after that anything was possible.

Reports of the unsatisfactory state of affairs did, however, reach India, and on the 17th January Surgeon-General MacNeece, the Director of Medical Services in India, arrived on a special commission of inquiry and stayed in our Mess. The following day I was at the hospital visiting

## SIR JOHN NIXON RETIRES

my son when Generals MacNeece and Hathaway arrived, and went round the wards as if they were in a London hospital, stopping here and there and asking questions in the most approved bedside manner. When they had left, several wounded officers asked me who they were, and, on being told, there was a general outcry, and it was suggested that they be informed that instead of visiting a comfortable hospital they could do better service by inspecting and trying to better the terrible state of affairs at the front. In the evening General MacNeece surprised us at Mess by saying he had decided he would not go beyond Basra, and therefore all the stores, aluminium cooking-pots, &c., which he had brought up with him were for sale. It is stated in the 'Official History of the War' that General MacNeece's report was not considered satisfactory by the Government of India, and another Commission was appointed.

On the 18th January 1916 General Sir John Nixon retired on sick leave, a sick man at heart as well as in body. A magnificent fighting soldier, I am afraid that the disasters which befell the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force must be attributed to his failure to realise the absolute necessity for establishing a properly organised base, and adequate system of transport, before he attempted to take the offensive in any direction.

Sir John Nixon was succeeded by General Sir

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

Percy Lake, who came direct from India, where he had held the post of Chief of the General Staff, and was the officer with whom I had discussed at Delhi the work which I had to carry out in Mesopotamia.

The day after he arrived Sir Percy Lake sent for me, and I told him all my troubles. Sir Percy Lake was a good soldier, very sympathetic and conscientious, and anxious to do all that was possible to straighten things out in Mesopotamia, but he lacked sufficient forceful personality, and the official machine, supported by heads of departments in the Government of India, was too strong for him ; he was therefore unable to carry out the sweeping changes that a man like Lord Kitchener would have effected at once. I now felt I must make an effort to get outside Basra and see for myself the state of the rivers and go across the Hammar Lake. I saw Sir Percy Cox, the Chief Political Officer, and found in him and his assistant, Lieut.-Colonel Arnold Wilson (now Sir Arnold Wilson, M.P.), two of the only really sane men I had met among the higher ranks in Basra. They could look at matters from an outsider's point of view, and fully realised the disastrous state of affairs. Sir Percy willingly consented to lend me his launch (the *Mohammerah*), and I made arrangements to leave for Amara the following day, taking the Hammar Lake on my return journey. Later in the day Surgeon-General Hathaway, D.D.M.S.,

## TOUR OF RIVER

hearing of my proposed tour, asked if he could accompany me as far as Amara, as he was anxious to inspect the hospital. Although it was exceedingly inconvenient to give him a passage on this small launch, I felt that if anything could induce him to leave Basra, he should be encouraged to do so. I therefore agreed, and said I would go direct to Amara and leave him there at the hospital.

On Friday, 21st January, we embarked. I had with me a subaltern, Lieutenant Atkinson, I.A.R.O., who had joined up from Calcutta, and was a man of energy. General Hathaway arrived with an immense amount of baggage and abundance of food, both solid and liquid. The weather was intensely cold, and the river and banks were swarming with duck. We passed Garmat Ali, a branch of the Euphrates, and arrived at Qurna at 9 P.M., went ashore to see O.C. troops, took on five tons of coal, and then went to our bunks. Left Qurna at daybreak, and at about 8 A.M., when fifteen miles above Qurna, a tube in the boiler burst and the engine-room was full of steam. The boiler, although almost new, had been so horribly neglected that most of the tubes were worn out. We were therefore perfectly helpless, and although we tried to patch the tube with plaster of paris and a piece of tin, we were unable to do so. About mid-day a terrific storm came on with very heavy rain and sleet and a keen wind from the north-west, the

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

cold was bitter, the rain came through the roof, and the launch was dashed from one bank to another until at last she grounded heavily and remained so all night.

On Saturday the storm continued with great violence, and we drifted back to Qurna, which we reached at two o'clock, having travelled fifteen miles in thirty hours. After remaining some time at Qurna and inspecting the small hospital, which was in a bad state with a number of British ranks lying on wet straw, we got a tow from a steamer going down the river, and the Captain told us he had left several hundred wounded from Shaikh Sa'ad at Amara, as he had been informed by the staff there that Basra hospitals were full. We reached Basra on the Sunday morning, and General Hathaway was able to say with truth that he had made a prodigious effort to reach Amara Hospital.

The weather continued very cold, and to walk anywhere at the base, even for a few yards, meant going nearly up to the knees in mud and slush. There was frost at night, and the thermometer in the middle of the day stood at 44°. Thus ended my first attempt to go up the line, and a few days later, the boiler having been temporarily repaired, I again sallied forth with the same result, so the launch was laid up until another boiler could be procured from India.

Meanwhile General Cowper, after much pressure, had found me a large brick house on



## NEW PORT WORKS

the banks of the Ashar Creek, and about a mile from G.H.Q.; there was a provision that two rooms were to be reserved for high officials making tours from India, and to this I had no objection as there was plenty of accommodation for all of us. The house was a large substantially built two-storey brick building, with a flat roof on which we slept in the hot weather. I and my staff lived on the upper storey, and below were the offices, drawing office, servants' quarters, &c. As I seemed fated to remain in Basra, I concentrated on the base, and prepared a layout for the new port at Ma'qil, complete with permanent deep-water wharves, floating pontoon landing-stages, land reclamation, metalled roads, and sheds. I estimated that after the arrival of the material it would be possible to erect one deep-sea berth per month, and I proposed to move the whole of the S. and T. and Ordnance Departments to Ma'qil as soon as accommodation could be provided, thus relieving the congestion at Basra. I proposed to build the wharves of teak-wood imported from Rangoon, and, although expensive, it would last almost indefinitely and be procured in much less time than steel piles and girders which would have to be imported from England.

My survey party of fifty-three men, all Anglo-Indians and Indians, arrived from Rangoon on the 1st February, but without the European Engineer who had been ordered to accompany

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

them ; and without any survey equipment and instruments it was therefore impossible to begin work, and all the party could do was to draw their rations and keep as warm as they could in a climate at that time of the year so different to Rangoon.

## CHAPTER V.

ABOUT this time I heard that a stern-wheeler called the *Shushan* was lying in the Karun River doing nothing; I immediately applied and obtained sanction to its being placed at my disposal. The *Shushan* was a boat with a history: she was originally built for the relief of General Gordon's expedition and was plying on the Karun River when the expeditionary force arrived in Mesopotamia. She was immediately utilised, and, armed with a 12-pounder, a 3-pounder, and a maxim, took a prominent part in the battles of Amara and Nasiriya, where she was the flagship of the Senior Naval Officer. When placed in commission again for my service, the 12-pounder had been removed, but we retained the 3-pounder and the maxim, and my cabin and the bridge were surrounded with iron plates as a protection against sniping.

The ship's company consisted of three naval ratings and a petty officer, two privates from the Dorset Regiment to work the guns, and a native escort of five men and a havildar from an Indian regiment. The navigating officer was a skipper

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

of the Tigris Navigation Company, and accompanying me was Lieutenant Atkinson who was now attached to my staff. We sailed on 14th February, flying the White Ensign, and proceeded to Qurna, where we anchored for the night, making an early start the following day. At Qurna the belt of palm trees which had extended all the way from Fao ceased, and there began a long stretch of the most desolate country imaginable, a treeless waste of swamp and desert, inhabited by the infamous marsh Arabs whose mud and reed huts could be seen dotted about here and there. We passed No. 11 Echelon returning to Basra, as evidently the ground was in such a state from the heavy rain that progress was impossible, and later on we passed No. 11 Paddle-Steamer hard and fast aground. Eleven miles from Qurna we came to a loop in the river known as the Pear Drop Bend, where the distance round the loop was two and a half miles but across the neck from water to water only 330 yards. When we began river improvement works I was frequently asked why I did not cut across this narrow neck and thus lessen the length of passage by two and a half miles. To the layman it seemed the obvious thing to do, but actually by changing the régime of the river we might have made matters worse instead of better, and there would have certainly been a stoppage of traffic for an unknown period whilst the river was adjusting itself to the new conditions. At

## NAVIGATION DIFFICULTIES

Ezra's Tomb, a domed building said to have been built 2500 years ago, we entered the Narrows, and the first sight that met our eyes was another large paddle-steamer hard aground. The difficulties of navigation had not been exaggerated, and as far as Qal'et Salah, fifty-seven miles from Qurna, we were winding through a narrow channel in which I counted twelve right-angle bends, at any one of which a steamer was in danger of grounding. Qal'at Salah, where we anchored for the night, was a small town with the usual mosque and minarets and a number of quite good two-storey buildings on the river-front. Thence onwards we got into a much better country; the swamps were left behind, and on either bank appeared a vast plain covered with low scrub; the river widened, although navigation continued difficult with many bends and nasty crossings. The town of Amara, which we reached in the afternoon of the 16th February, is the most important town between Basra and Baghdad, and had a large trade with Persia. I was impressed with the fine houses on the front and with the spacious bazaar where, as in India, articles of every possible description could be purchased. We had appointed a Military Governor and generally taken possession, and when I arrived there were no troops but 6000 sick and wounded in hospitals. Heavy rain fell nearly all the time we were in Amara, and at night the *Shushan* was sniped continuously

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

by hostile Arabs. Above Amara the country again changed, and became even more bare and desolate, the mud and the reed huts giving way to the black goat-hair tents of the Bani Lam tribe, the most hostile and independent of the tribes and as savage and cruel as treacherous. At Ali Sharqi, 27 miles above Amara and 159 from Basra, there was a blue-domed Arab shrine surrounded by a delightful belt of mulberries and willow.

We were now just 100 miles from the front, where the prospect of relieving Kut was lessening day by day. On the 20th to 22nd January had occurred the third great battle, this time on the Umm-el-Hannah position; the weather conditions were appalling and rapidly became worse, the ground being converted into such a morass that all progress was impossible; assault after assault failed, and we had the real Anatolian Turk against us in overwhelming numbers. On the 22nd January there was a six-hour armistice to bring in the dead and remove the wounded. Our troops were utterly exhausted, and our casualties numbered 2741 including 78 British officers.

“General Aylmer was carrying on operations with an improvised staff, makeshift organisation, and inadequate transport, medical, and other resources; in fact, under such conditions that only an apparently imperative necessity had justified his attempting offensive operations.

## THE TRANSPORT FACTOR

. . . The main operations were taking place some 250 miles by river from Basra, and their successful conduct was much impeded by the shortage of river transport, additions to which were not arriving as quickly as anticipated. Further, when they did arrive, besides requiring considerable overhaul after their overseas voyage, many of them were without expert and reliable crews, a deficiency it was impossible to make good in Mesopotamia. As an instance of how much the transport factor affected the successful issue of operations, there were at Basra on the 21st January, the day of the unsuccessful attack on Hanna, reinforcements of some 10,000 infantry and twelve guns which could not be sent up-stream owing to lack of shipping. To send more of them by land than was being done was impracticable, and the rains and floods rendered the track up the Tigris impassable for days at a time, for the track was at this time still below flood level, and only the larger waterways along it had been roughly bridged with any material available.

“Other disadvantages of the shortage of river craft were that it rendered the provision at the front of adequate supplies and stores of all kinds a most difficult matter; it prevented the rapid transfer of troops from one bank of the river to the other for operation purposes, and it so limited the amount of land transport which could be sent to General Aylmer’s force as to tie him to the immediate vicinity of the river.

“Reinforcements and stores were arriving at Basra faster than they could be sent up-stream; accommodation ashore was limited, with the result that the congestion at the port was very

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

great ; there was a shortage of labour and the staff of the P.M.T.O. was too small.”<sup>1</sup>

I had now got as far as I had intended on my first tour, and much as I should have liked to continue my inspection of the line of communication up to the front, my inspection of the Euphrates and Hammar Lake was more important, so we turned ; and after inspecting the mouths of several of the large canals which take off from the Tigris, we made our way back to Qurna for an inspection of the Euphrates, and *en route* met another paddle-steamer full of troops and stores which had been hard aground for two days.

We arrived at Qurna in the morning of the 19th February and saw the Political Officer, who said all was fairly quiet on the Euphrates, but I must not leave the launch without a guard of three rifles. We took on an Arab pilot and plunged into a veritable sea of waters. As far as the eye could reach was water and swamp, covered with high reeds from which hundreds of wildfowl rose at every chunk of the stern wheel. We travelled along the old channel of the Euphrates, which was still the only navigable one, and passing a fairly large village on an island ten miles from Qurna we reached Chabaish and the entrance to the Hammar Lake, forty-five miles from Qurna, in the evening, and

<sup>1</sup> ‘ Official History of the War. Mesopotamia Campaign.’ Vol. II.



## THE HAMMAR LAKE

anchored for the night. The Hammar Lake, caused by the Euphrates bursting its right bank, was about fifteen miles broad and dotted with small islands, on each of which were a cluster of palm trees. It was about as wild a spot as I have ever seen, and one cannot but admire the courage of the men who, advancing to Nasiriya, took this leap into the unknown and found a passage through the innumerable creeks. Without a pilot we should have been completely lost, but foot by foot, and sounding all the way, we got to the head of the Akaika Channel, and passed through the breach in the bund built by the Arabs for irrigation purposes. At the far end of the creek we joined the Euphrates, which in the twenty-five-mile stretch to Nasiriya was a fine river two to three hundred yards wide, with richly cultivated land, chiefly rice, on either bank, many gardens, belts of palm trees, and numerous villages. We arrived at Nasiriya in the afternoon of the 20th February, and were surprised to find a town, well laid out, of some 10,000 inhabitants, with wide streets and a number of quite substantial buildings.

I dined with the Divisional Commander (General Brooking) and discussed the situation. The General said there was considerable unrest amongst the Arabs, and the previous week he had been obliged to go out in force to punish hostile Arab tribes to the north of the town, and he had to admit that his authority did not

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

extend much beyond the town and the neighbouring river bank. He condemned their treachery and the way they killed and mutilated any of our wounded. He would certainly like a channel across the Hammar Lake, and the sooner the better. I left the following day, and decided to do some exploration work along different channels, so instead of taking the Akaika we proceeded along the Euphrates to an alternative channel called the Mazlik. Unfortunately the pilot took the wrong turning, and after going a long way along what appeared to be a good channel with plenty of water, it became very tortuous and shallow, and in the strong wind we were bumping from one bank to another. Finally, we came to a standstill alongside a large village. Immediately the bank was lined with hundreds of Arabs, definitely hostile, and brandishing their rifles. We all took cover, and the men of the Dorsets stood by the guns, which were protected by iron plating. The Arabs realised our strength and quietened down and allowed the *Shushan's* head to be turned. We next tried the Mazlik channel, but that also petered out, so we returned for the night to Suk-es-Shuyek, where we were warmly welcomed by the Political Officer. He told us the village where we had been held up was notorious for the treachery of the inhabitants, but it had been a good act done to show the flag. We were sniped all night from the far bank, and left in

## END OF TOUR

the morning, arriving at Basra in the afternoon of the 24th February.

My tour had lasted ten days and given me much food for thought. I saw my way materially to the improvement of navigation, but could not plan a scheme of operation until a number of marine surveys and studies had been made by my survey staff.

With regard to the Euphrates, I still maintained that the proper course would be to build a railway from Basra to Nasiriya and make that the main line of communication, but if the dredging of a channel across the Hammar Lake was insisted upon, it could be done ; and I made preparations to begin the work.

## CHAPTER VI.

A SERIES of disasters now occurred which entirely upset my programme. My engineers and surveyors were waiting in Basra for the survey equipment, and a steamer had arrived from Bombay on the 15th February with all our gear packed at the bottom of the hold ; but on the 29th February, when for the first time we were able to get hold of the cases, the steamer gaily sailed back to Bombay, leaving most of our gear in the hold. My large dredger from Rangoon had arrived under her own steam at Bombay on the 11th February, but was not despatched from Bombay until the 4th March, and was then made to take a large paddler in tow ; and as the dredger had no surplus steam power she took six days to reach Karachi. The master then refused to proceed farther until he had communicated with me, the tow was taken off, and he arrived at Basra on the 21st March. The dredger itself was useless without the pipeline, consisting of 1000 feet of 24-inch diameter pipes, a number of iron pontoons, anchors,

## OBSTRUCTION

winches, and other gear measuring 640 cubic tons. All this had been loaded on a steamer and despatched from Rangoon on the 17th January, but instead of sailing direct to Basra, the Bombay transport authorities had insisted upon her going to Bombay and the whole of the heavy gear being transhipped to other vessels, the result being that our pipes, &c., were not expected to arrive until some time in April.

I was exceedingly angry, and wrote a long report to the Army Commander detailing all that had happened, and pointing out that it would now be quite impossible for me to complete my works before the next low-water season. I added that my staff and myself would do all that was humanly possible to expedite the works, but that these delays had deprived us of the power of making them the success which might reasonably have been anticipated. On the 28th March the Army Commander sent for me to discuss my report, and I said that there were certain officers both in Bombay and Basra who did not want me in Mesopotamia, that I was being obstructed, and that I had reluctantly formed the opinion that the delays in forwarding my plant and material and in returning my survey equipment to Bombay was intentional. I had felt for a long time that I was not wanted, that my work was not considered urgent, and that my advice on matters concerning which I had expert

knowledge was brushed aside. Sir Percy Lake said he knew there had been jealousy and obstruction, and he would insist on matters being put right, but he must consider how best to deal with the matter, as several of the departments concerned were not under his control. I had, however, the privilege as a Director of coming to see him personally at any time.

Meanwhile conditions in Basra were getting more and more chaotic, and at the request of the Army Commander I wrote reports advocating the reorganisation of the port and transport system generally. I pointed out that it was not the fault of the Principal Marine Transport Officer (an Indian Marine officer) that he could not manage a large port, and the time had come for decentralisation and his relief from a portion of his duties, which from their unusual nature must be a burden to him. I advocated the appointment of an independent officer accustomed to the traffic work in a large commercial port, who would be called the Traffic Superintendent, and made responsible for the unloading of vessels, despatch of goods to the various departments, and the wharfage arrangements. There was no difficulty in the matter, which simply meant the substitution of methods used at ports all over the world for the present doubtless well-meant but crude efforts of amateurs.

Regarding the transport system I made a

## TRANSPORT REQUIREMENTS

number of suggestions, and pointed out that a perfect transport service depended upon—

- (1) Sufficient number of steamers.
- (2) Adequate means of repairing and maintaining vessels.
- (3) A navigable river at all times of the year.
- (4) Competent management of the transport service by one responsible officer, and if all these were not co-ordinated there would be failures and breakdowns.

Although the military situation might render it necessary to work the river steamers and launches continuously month in and month out, this state of affairs could not be continued indefinitely, and the day must come when there would be a general breakdown, as repairs must be executed, engines overhauled, and boilers periodically cleaned.

No improvement resulted from my interview with the Army Commander ; indeed, matters got worse. My light paddle-steamer for the survey, which had been delivered at Bombay in perfect order, arrived at Basra stripped of all her fittings, even to her paddle floats ; my survey equipment was returned to Basra in a steamer without any consignment note, and, but for the vigilance of my staff, would again have returned to Bombay ; and a number of most important fittings for the dredger were

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

found by chance, dumped on the marine store yard scrap-heap.

I concluded that the department which Sir Percy Lake said was not under his control must be the Marine, and I decided that the sooner I got away to India and stated my case personally to the Viceroy and the Commander-in-Chief, the better for the army in Mesopotamia, although it was now plain that nothing short of a miracle could save Kut.

After the battle of Umm-el-Hannah on the 21st January there was a halt of six weeks for the reorganisation and concentration of the troops who had been coming up in dribblets from Basra, and on the 8th March there was another desperate attempt to break through the Turkish defences, which resulted in yet one more serious repulse, with the loss of 470 killed and 2877 wounded and missing. By this time the field medical units attached to the 5th and 7th Divisions had arrived at the front, and the increase in the general medical establishment and medical stores had greatly improved the evacuation of and attention to the wounded, although much avoidable suffering was still caused by the lack of ambulance waggons for the long journey of seventeen miles from the battlefield to the camp.

On 11th March the gallant General Aylmer was relieved of his command and succeeded by General Gorringe. I do not think there was



## DEPARTURE FOR BOMBAY

a man who did not feel great sympathy for General Aylmer, who had been asked to perform an impossible task. During the month the Force was reinforced by the 13th all-British Division and other troops, and on 5th April General Gorringe began his operations for the relief of Kut ; but although the Turkish casualties were very heavy, repeated attempts failed to break through the defences.

Having decided my course of action, I wrote to the D.A. and Q.M.G. and asked him to obtain the sanction of the Army Commander to my going to Bombay to arrange for a contractor to come with trained men to Basra and build the new wharves, and, sanction being granted, I sailed on the 4th April. I spent the whole of my time on the transport writing a long report to the Government of India, detailing my experiences in Mesopotamia and enclosing copies of all the reports I had made and my correspondence with the D.A. and Q.M.G. I arrived at Bombay on the 11th April, and found a telegram from the Military Secretary saying H.E. the C.-in-C. wished to see me as soon as possible. After reporting my arrival at the Brigade Office, I spent the next two days with my friend Messent, the chief engineer to the Port Trust, arranging for a Chinese contractor and his men to go at once to Basra with all necessary plant to build the new wharves. I left for Simla by the night mail on the 13th, arriving at 2.30 on the 15th

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

April, and was met by my wife, daughter, and my son, who was recuperating from his wound. It was the beginning of the Simla season, the hotels were full, and dinners and dances going on as usual. The ladies attended V.A.D. classes and made garments for the troops, but otherwise there was no sign that a great war was in progress. My wife gave a dinner party the night I arrived, but I was unable to appreciate Simla small-talk, and wished myself back at Basra. Simla was not alone in being indifferent to the war, but at all events the officials were not making money, whereas in all the Indian towns, the European and Indian mill-owners, manufacturers, and merchants were making so much money that their only fear was that the war might come to an end. At a later date, when I sent one of my officers to Calcutta to buy some machinery urgently required, he was so annoyed at the attitude of one of the leading Europeans that he asked when Calcutta was going to join the Allies.

For the first day or two in Simla I was very busy completing my report and seeing to its being printed, and had asked the Military Secretary to keep me away from the Chief until that was done. I tried to be moderate in my remarks, which I said had been written solely in the interest of military operations, as I had formed the opinion that without better organisation in the near future, there could be no improvement.

## INTERVIEW WITH CHIEF

On Easter Sunday, 23rd April, we<sup>all</sup> (my family and myself) lunched with H.E. the Commander-in-Chief, Sir Beauchamp Duff, and after lunch the Chief took me to his study and said he had read carefully the whole of my report and what was the meaning of it. I replied that, in a few words, I felt as if I were living in a lunatic asylum when in Basra. The Chief seemed surprised, and said he was not accustomed to his officers using such strong language. However, we settled down to discussion, and at the end of three hours the Chief said he was amazed and thoroughly upset, as the orders of the Government of India had not been carried out, and he thanked me most heartily for speaking my mind. He then took up a pen and a telegraph form and ordered the immediate return to Bombay of several officers in Basra. The Chief asked me why, seeing that he had sent me to Mesopot, I had not written direct to him or to the Chief of the General Staff long ago, and I replied that it had not been possible to do so because the censorship of correspondence was mainly directed to the concealment from the Government of India of what was going on. This was unfortunately the case, as any letter from officer or private which contained the smallest reflection on the state of affairs in Mesopot was promptly suppressed by the Censor. I remember one morning when I was in the office of the D.A. and Q.M.G. an officer came in

and showed him a letter in which occurred the words, "Our so-called medical services." The Q.M.G. was most annoyed and asked who the officer was and where he was stationed, and on being told his name and the fact that he was dead, the Q.M.G. remarked :—

"This letter cannot go ; the man's father is a Peer and he might ask questions in the House of Lords."

I felt very strongly on the subject, and ventured to suggest that as it was the last letter the unfortunate subaltern wrote, it would be a monstrous thing to prevent its receipt by his father, Peer or no Peer, and that if it was suppressed I should make it my business to acquaint his father with the facts once I got away from the country. The Q.M.G. might have severely reprimanded me, but he took it in good part, and the letter went home without obliteration.

The following day I was summoned to Viceregal Lodge to see Lord Chelmsford, the new Viceroy, who in the course of an hour's conversation questioned me closely about affairs in Mesopotamia, and expressed astonishment at all I told him. My reports had now been circulated to the various departments interested, and I was very busy discussing details and making arrangements for the future. On the 27th April we all dined at Viceregal Lodge, a large official dinner party of forty people, and my son and

## FALL OF KUT

myself, having no other clothes, were permitted to appear in our field service kit, being the first guests to dine at Viceregal Lodge under such conditions, although later on it became a usual custom when officers arrived from the front.

My visit to Simla proved fully justified, and in a letter from the Chief of the General Staff to the Army Commander in Mesopotamia it was pointed out that the intentions of the Government of India in regard to my appointment had not been carried out, and that on my return to Basra I was to be an independent staff officer of the G.O.C. Force (D), to whom alone I would report and from alone would take orders. I was to have entire control of the Port of Basra under the orders of the G.O.C., and in addition I was to be in charge of all river works from the mouth of the Shatt-el-Arab to the farthest point under our control on the Tigris and Euphrates, and be responsible for making rules and regulations for preserving the rivers in a navigable condition and regulating the traffic thereon.

Although it was a foregone conclusion, we were all much distressed to hear on the 29th April that Kut had fallen after a siege of five months, and 277 British officers, 204 Indian officers, 2592 British rank and file, and 6988 Indian rank and file, besides 3248 non-combatant Indian followers, became prisoners of war. The garrison had been on half rations since January, and the last day's ration was consumed on the day of surrender.

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

Terrible as was the fall of Kut, still more terrible and heart-breaking was the fate of the unfortunate prisoners of war, of whom 70 per cent of the British and 30 per cent of the Indians died miserably in captivity, after untold sufferings. Thus closed one of the blackest pages in our history.

In the attempt to relieve Kut we had sustained 22,000 casualties and performed prodigies of valour, but to no end, unless, indeed, the failures served as a lesson and warning to those engaged in future wars.

## CHAPTER VII.

I WAS now anxious to return to Mesopotamia and get to work, and I left Simla on the 6th May, accompanied by my son, who was returning to his regiment. We arrived at Basra on the 16th May, and Colonel Wauchope came down from the front, and after staying with me for a few days returned to the regiment, taking my son with him.

I found considerable changes on my return. The control of operations had been handed over to the War Office in February 1916, and they were getting into their stride. A new Inspector-General of Communications had arrived in the person of Major-General MacMunn (now Lieut.-General Sir George MacMunn, K.C.B., &c.), who had been D.A. and Q.M.G. of the Dardanelles Army and had organised the evacuation. General MacMunn was a thoroughly capable and energetic officer, who at Basra found full scope for his organising ability. We got on very well together, although he strongly objected to my being an independent staff officer under the Army Commander, and said my appointment and nomen-

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

clature was a great mistake, and due to ignorance of the correct procedure on the part of the Viceroy and Commander-in-Chief, as I should have been a Director on his staff.

I had had so much trouble in establishing my position that I did not feel like making a change, and when I mentioned the matter to Army Headquarters they said they wished MacMunn would mind his own damned business. But as a matter of fact General MacMunn was perfectly correct—it was his business. All my work was connected with ‘Communications,’ and I should have been one of his staff officers, in which case numerous references to the Army Commander at the front would have been avoided.

I now found myself at last with an immense amount of work before me. In the first instance, effect had to be given to the orders of the Government of India, and after much discussion with the Army Commander (Sir Percy Lake) and the Inspector-General of Communications (General MacMunn), Force Routine Order No. 907, dated 10th June, was issued :—

### CONTROL OF THE PORT OF BASRA AND MESOPOTAMIAN WATERWAYS.

It has been decided to form a directorate to control the Port of Basra on the lines of a first-class commercial port, and to conserve the navigable Mesopotamian waterways. With this



## NEW PORT DIRECTORATE

object, Colonel Sir George Buchanan, Kt., C.I.E., has been deputed by the Government of India to the Indian Expeditionary Force ' D ' as Director-General of Port Administration and River Conservancy.

(2) The organisation of this Directorate will be as follows :—

### (1) Port Administration.

- (i) Marine control (under Port Officer)—  
*i.e.*, movements of sea-going vessels within the port, berthing and mooring of vessels, control of harbour-masters and pilots, and enforcement of port rules and regulations.
- (ii) Traffic management (under Director of Traffic). The discharge of transports and deliveries of their contents to the departments concerned, including the control for this purpose of the necessary port craft of all kinds and of stevedores and labour.
- (iii) Port works (under the Port Engineer and D.D. Works within their respective charges) ; design and execution of all wharves, jetties, docks, sheds, and other port works.

### (2) River Conservancy.

- (i) All works for the improvement and preservation of the Mesopotamian waterways from the lightship at

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

the mouth of the Shatt-el-Arab River upwards.

- (ii) The surveying, lighting, buoying, and marking of the navigable channels.
- (iii) The framing and issue of rules and regulations for preserving the river in a navigable condition and for regulating the traffic thereon.

My task was not an easy one. As the head of a Military Directorate my principal function was to assist in every way the Army Commander in the prosecution of the war ; but at the same time I had to bear in mind that if at the end of the war Mesopotamia became a part of the British Empire, it was most desirable that the works and organisation of the port of Basra should be an asset and assistance to whatever administration was set up in time of peace. Further, in connection with river conservancy I had in the first instance been sent to Mesopotamia at the instance of the Admiralty as an adviser, and to see that no works were carried out on the rivers which might do more harm than good. I had emphasised the necessity for previous studies and surveys before beginning operations of any kind, and I decided, in addition to military works, to take the opportunity of collecting as much information as possible on the river systems, with a view to its utilisation at a later date.

A Civil Administration had been set up from

the date of the occupation of Basra under the control of the late Sir Percy Cox, Chief Political Officer and afterwards High Commissioner, and Lieut.-Colonel A. T. Wilson, now Sir Arnold Wilson, M.P. To these two officers I owe a debt of gratitude for their advice and assistance on many occasions when discussing works affecting the future of the country; and at Sir Percy Cox's request copies of all my reports were sent to him for permanent record in his office.

In the matter of staff, I was fortunate in obtaining as Director of Traffic Mr P. H. Browne (now Sir Philip Browne), a shipping man of great experience, who was in Basra at the time as Shipping Adviser to the Admiralty, having been lent for that purpose by the late Lord Inchcape; he was also an old friend and colleague of mine on the Rangoon Port Trust.

The Port Officer was a Commander in the Royal Indian Marine, who had performed similar duties in Indian ports, and the post of Port Engineer was filled by one of my staff from Rangoon.

We had now made the first step towards sane port administration and river conservancy, the pity being that something of the kind had not been given effect to a year earlier, because the difficulties encountered in organising and creating new departments and scrapping existing methods were prodigious and the delays exasperating. I soon learned that the ordinary standards of

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

common-sense and business procedure were not considered applicable in time of war. The professional soldier is frequently hidebound outside his own profession, and this defect is accentuated by age. One of the exceptions in Mesopotamia was General MacMunn, the Inspector-General of Communications, who would have succeeded in any business or profession he chose to take up.

In many respects the conditions at the base were being improved, and General MacMunn had got to work with great energy. Military works had taken in hand the building of a metalled road right through the river-front to Ma'qil, a work I had advocated from the date of my first arrival. Large areas of land were being reclaimed and protected by bunds from floods, huts were replacing tents, new hospitals and store sheds were in course of erection, mechanical transport had been introduced, and a piped supply of chlorinated water was laid to the various camps, to mention a few of the many improvements. At the same time, General MacMunn had organised and appointed a thoroughly efficient staff at the base and along the line of communications. The construction of railways had at last been sanctioned, and the line between Basra and Nasiriya was begun in April 1916 and completed by the end of the year ; while another line was put in hand from Qurna to Amara, thus assisting transport on the most difficult section of the river.

## REQUIREMENTS OF MODERN PORT

To carry out the various works at the base and build the railways necessitated the importation of large quantities of material of all kinds, and the ever-increasing influx of men, guns, equipment, and stores for the army in the field increased the congestion at Basra, which by this time had reached the standard of a first-class port from the point of view of tonnage, but remained a fifth-class port in efficiency and accommodation.

To raise the standard of efficiency was the function of my Directorate, and to that end my heads of departments and myself began by setting down on paper the complete requirements of a modern port in each department, and then advancing step by step to a higher standard. It was a tedious and difficult task; we had to scour all India for men accustomed to port work, and as the needs of the army necessarily came first, there was great delay in getting from India the shiploads of timber and iron-work wherewith to build the new wharves and landing-stages.

One of my constant worries was in connection with my own water transport equipment. I had been told when I arrived in Mesopotamia that I must make my own arrangements for the supply of launches and other river craft, and this I had done, but as soon as they arrived at Basra they were commandeered by the D.A., and Q.M.G., the I.G.C., or officers acting on their

behalf, on the ground of urgent military requirements.

The result was that frequently the whole work of the port was brought to a standstill because harbour-masters, pilots, and traffic superintendents were unable to get off to ships lying in the stream clamouring for their services. It is obvious that a ship ready to go to sea or come into harbour cannot move until the harbour-master or pilot goes on board and takes charge. At last the delays to ships became so serious (five transports held up in one day) that I was constrained to ask whether my staff were expected to swim to the ships in order to carry out their duties, and whether it was in order for the staff at the harbour-master's office down the river to starve, as had happened on several occasions because there was no launch available to take down their rations. Sir Arnold Wilson in his book 'Loyalties' was pleased to call me "an eminent but pugnacious engineer," and if a continual struggle against incompetence, ignorance, and obstruction can be called by that name, he was correct. On the other hand, I remember in the course of a friendly argument with a man, stating that I was essentially a man of peace, which so amused my opponent that he took the first letters of the sentence and christened myself and my officers 'The Emops,' by which name they were known for a long time.

As my Directorate did not come into being

## TOUR DOWN CHAHALA CANAL

until the 15th of June, I took the opportunity of making another tour up the river, in order to decide where the survey parties were to begin work. I left Basra on the 8th June in the *Shushan* and reached Amara on the 10th, and the following day Mr Dobbs of the Political Department (the late Sir Henry Dobbs, G.C.M.G.) accompanied me on a tour down the Chahala Canal, going in Dobbs's unarmoured launch. I was very anxious to inspect this waterway, which was as broad and as deep as the Tigris, and after proceeding without difficulty for about fifteen miles, we arrived at a large village full of armed men. Here we were obliged to land and were conducted to the Council House of the Sheikh and given coffee, while Dobbs entered into a long conversation with the Sheikh and his councillors. At last we managed to get away, and when well on our return passage Dobbs asked me if I had understood the conversation, and on my replying in the negative, he told me that the Sheikh was well aware of the reason for our visit and was apprehensive of the danger to his country if we put a dam across the mouth of the Chahala, thus depriving him of water, that he and his men seriously debated the advisability of destroying the whole of our party, but were rather put off by our badges of rank. Finally they decided that to murder us would be too dangerous, as retribution would surely follow, and we were allowed to depart.

We got back to Amara in the afternoon, and,

steaming up the river all night, passed Ali Gharbi eighty miles from Amara at 8.30 A.M. From there to Shaikh Sa'ad (the scene of the first big battle by the Kut Relieving Force) the river was in a shocking condition, and surveys and markings of shoals were urgently required. The country was bare and desolate, the home of the Bani Lam Arabs, whose camel-hair tents could be seen dotted around. It was dangerous to go ashore without an escort, and a few days previously an officer riding alone had been shot dead by Arabs, and his naked body recovered by a search party. After passing the boat bridge at Arab Village, fifteen miles from Shaikh Sa'ad, we steamed along slowly for a couple of miles until we found ourselves opposite the Black Watch camp and not very far from the Sannaiyat firing line. I met my son and Colonel Wauchope (now General Sir Arthur Wauchope) and after dinner returned to the *Shushan* for the night, but at 1 A.M. we were roused by gun and rifle fire, and received an order to go below the bridge. In the morning I walked up to the camp and spent an hour or two talking to Colonel Wauchope, and later on, with Colonel Wauchope's permission, I was taken up to the trenches where both sides were marking time and had settled down to trench warfare.

The Turks had consolidated their position, and were strongly entrenched at Sannaiyat on the left bank of the Tigris, and at Bait Isa on



## TURKS' MASTERY IN THE AIR

the right bank; at Sannaiyat the trenches of the opposing parties faced each other, our advanced saps being within ninety yards of the Turkish line. The Turks, with their fine Fokker aeroplanes, had gained the mastery of the air, and it was painful to see our machines scatter like pigeons before a hawk when a Fokker appeared in the sky; and the day before my arrival three ammunition barges had been blown up and sunk by Turkish gun-fire directed by aeroplanes not very far from where I had anchored the *Shushan*. I found the general atmosphere at the front one of great depression, as, in addition to casualties in the trenches, there was an appalling amount of sickness due to the intense heat, insufficient and unsuitable diet, and lack of any kind of diversion or amusement for the troops.

On the 14th June, at 5 A.M., we began our return journey, and on the 15th arrived at Qurna and anchored for the night. My diary records: "a night of hell, heat, and flies and mosquitoes." At daybreak we entered the Euphrates and in the afternoon reached the entrance to the Hammar Lake, where the large dredger had arrived and was making preparations to begin operations. We pushed on to Nasiriya, as I wanted to see the General about guarding the dredger. I was much impressed with the difference between the camp at Nasiriya and those on the Tigris. Here all the men were in mat

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

huts, cheerful and comfortable, three months' supplies in store, and a Y.M.C.A. canteen.

The Arabs were giving considerable trouble, and I watched an 18-pound battery shelling a village 4000 yards away. It was dangerous to stir outside the camp, and any of our wounded men were mercilessly butchered. I left at day-break and stayed some time at the dredger, arriving at Basra on the 19th June.

The climatic difficulties of the campaign in Mesopotamia deserve special mention, not that in peace-time, with good housing and all the amenities and safeguards that go with civilisation, the actual climate is much more trying than many parts of India, but because of the appalling conditions under which men worked, marched, fought, and died during the war. I have lived in many trying climates, but never have I felt the cold and the heat as I did in Lower Mesopotamia. During the months of November, December, January, and February there were generally a series of violent rain and hail storms with intensely cold nights, when a bitter wind from the snow-covered mountains in Armenia pierced one's bones, and the temperature dropped to several degrees below freezing-point. March, April, and May were the only pleasant months with a dry heat going up to 90° in the daytime and cool nights. Towards the end of May the days began to warm up, and the flies put in an appearance; then at the

## PLAGUE OF FLIES

beginning of June the hot weather came in with a bang, and all the flies in the world seemed to have settled in Mesopotamia. They resembled the ordinary English house-fly, except that a number of them inflicted poisonous bites; but their quantity and activity had to be seen to be believed. They came in clouds and settled on everything, both animate and inanimate; and although plates of food were covered with mosquito netting, before the food got into one's mouth it was covered with flies, and a cup of tea would have a dozen flies struggling in it before one's lips were reached. Horses and mules looked as though they were encased in chain armour, and I found it impossible to go about my duties without a mosquito net tied around my head. At night the flies disappeared, but gave way to the sandfly and mosquito, one breed of which was able to sting through cord riding-breeches. The mosquitoes could be kept away by a net, but the sandfly would penetrate any netting, unless the mesh was so fine that it was suffocating to lie under. The sandfly is also a transmitter of a microbe which will lay a man out for a week or more with a violent fever, and at one time I had nearly all my officers put out of action in this manner. By the end of June the heat became so intense that ordinary flies could not live—nothing killed the sandfly.

July, August, and September were ghastly months. As soon as the sun rose above the

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

horizon he seemed to strike a blow ; and if going out before sunrise I had forgotten to put on my spine-pad, I had to hurry back to camp as soon as possible.

At the peak of the hot weather the Base Commandant issued an order that " During the hot weather corporal punishment will only be administered between 6 A.M. and 8 A.M." We wondered whether the order was issued in the interest of the man who administered the floggings, or the wretched creatures who were flogged. The usual hour for punishment had been about mid-day in a room adjoining an Officers' Mess, and I remember when lunching there one day my attention being drawn to some extraordinary noises. It was then explained to me what was going on next door, and my informant told me that they had grown so knowledgable in the Mess that they could tell from the nature of the cries whether the sufferer was an Arab, Persian, or Indian. The man who flogged was an extremely robust sergeant, and at the end of the performance he invariably marched off whistling a hymn tune, " The voice that breathed o'er Eden " being a favourite.

In July 1916 there were over 18,000 men in hospital who were being evacuated to India at the rate of 1000 per day, and the journey from Basra up the line was so deadly that new drafts lost half their effectives before they reached their destination ; one draft of 135 men for the

## EXHAUSTION OF TROOPS

Highland Light Infantry being reduced to 39 before they reached the front. The sufferings of the troops were incomparably greater than on any other war front, as in addition to the usual ailments associated with the tropics, were added scurvy and beri-beri, diseases entirely due to malnutrition and lack of vitamins.

Of gaiety or recreation in Mesopotamia there was none. In the summer of 1916 the troops were completely exhausted and often on half rations, and there was not a man who was not either sick or sorry. If sick enough he was sent to hospital, and if he did not die he was, on convalescence, put on a hospital ship and despatched to Bombay, where, at least, decent food and iced drinks could be obtained along with a certain amount of cheerful society. The whole time I was in Mesopotamia I was never sick, and this I attributed largely to the fact that my mind was so intensely occupied that I did not have time to think about the heat; and my body, aided by inoculations against enteric, paratyphoid, plague, and cholera was sufficiently strong to resist the attacks of sun, sandflies, and mosquitoes. In the hot weather I was always completely exhausted by the end of the day, and I found one whisky-and-soda essential to my wellbeing.

## CHAPTER VIII.

By July my department was slowly and gradually getting to work in various directions. I had managed to obtain from France two of my best Rangoon engineers, and from India a staff of engineers and surveyors from the Public Works Department, a number of whom unfortunately fell sick before they had been many days in the country. The Chinese contractor engaged in Bombay had arrived with a gang of Chinese carpenters, and work had been started at building the new deep-water wharf for ocean steamers, and the pontoons and bridge-work for floating pontoon landing-stages was coming up from Bombay in driblets. Several more dredgers had also been obtained from India, notably one of a particular type for use on the outer bar.

The amount of surveying to do was prodigious, as all port and river work necessitates as a preliminary measure the making of accurate surveys, and in Mesopotamia there were no previous records. Sir William Willcocks had made extensive surveys in connection with his great

## WORK OF SURVEY PARTIES

project for the irrigation of Mesopotamia, but they did not give us much help.

One party of surveyors was set to work running a line of levels from Fao to Basra, a distance of sixty-two miles, in order to establish a datum with mean sea level. Another party was employed making surveys of the difficult reaches up the Tigris, with a view to improvement works and buoying ; a third party was busy in the Hammar Lake, and a fourth party was engaged in making a marine chart of the Shatt-el-Arab River. All these men had to be fed, given tents, and protected from the marauding Arab. The surveyors were largely Indians who had never before worked under such trying conditions, but they stuck to their work in an amazing manner and nothing seemed to put them out.

In my marine work I had the hearty co-operation and assistance of the Royal Navy, now increased to a flotilla of twelve powerful river gunboats. The senior officer was Captain Nunn (now Rear-Admiral Wilfrid Nunn, C.B., C.S.I., C.M.G.), a man of infinite resource and infinite humour, as may be seen from reading his book ' Tigris Gunboats ' ; and his second-in-command was Captain Wason (now Rear-Admiral Cathcart Wason, C.M.G., C.I.E.). From these officers I obtained sound advice, and when touring up the line I was made welcome on any of the fleet ; while as we were sometimes short of rations and the Navy was well supplied with

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

food and drink, a few hours on a gunboat was a great relaxation. To quote from the Mesopotamian A.B.C. :—

“ N’s for the Navy that’s tied to the shore,  
They’ve lashings of beer and rations galore ;  
Oh, why didn’t I join the Navy before  
I came to Mesopotamia.”

In June 1916 the shortage of river transport still remained the principal difficulty with which the Force had to contend. None of the steamers and barges ordered from England the previous August were in commission, and the heterogeneous collection of craft hastily brought to Basra from various parts of the world were largely unsuitable, and in many cases in urgent need of repair. In these circumstances the Government of India, after consultation with Sir Percy Lake, appointed a Committee with myself as President to consider and report upon the number and nature of the craft required to provide a satisfactory river service for the army in Mesopotamia, and the method to be adopted to keep the fleet in a state of efficient repair, including detailed proposals for the establishment of a thoroughly equipped marine dockyard and repair shops on the line of communications. Associated with me on the Committee were Major-General MacMunn, Major Horne, who in civil life was the Chief Engineer to the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company in Burma, and two other officers ; and the data on which to frame



## RIVER FLEET COMMITTEE

an estimate of requirements was furnished by the Chief of the General Staff, Army Headquarters, India. We were instructed that provision had to be made for the daily requirements of five divisions, with a possible increase of 50 per cent, and additional transport for one division of all arms—that is to say, a maximum of 1200 tons per day for supplies, equipment, and stores of all kinds against an existing supply of 350 to 400 tons.

The Committee held a number of meetings, and, on the assumption that the Force would ultimately reach Baghdad and that the round trip to Baghdad would take twenty days (taking into consideration the difficulties of navigation), we estimated the requirements of the army at 118 paddle-steamers and tugs and 200 barges; and for other purposes 28 hospital ships, 40 hospital barges, 16 port tugs, 73 port barges, 127 motor boats, and other miscellaneous craft, raising the total number of units in the fleet to 784—a figure which closely corresponded with the actual number in commission at the date of the occupation of Baghdad.

With reference to repairs and maintenance of this great fleet, the Committee considered a report by Major Horne and myself, and recommended the immediate construction of a thoroughly equipped marine dockyard, with housing accommodation for staff and workmen.

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

In July it had been decided by the War Committee of the Cabinet in London that in future the War Office should be responsible for the entire administration and supply of the Force in Mesopotamia, and the Commander-in-Chief in India was to take his instructions from, and be responsible to, the Army Council. There was already installed at the War Office an organisation called Inland Water Transport, and in due course the Army Council appointed a Director of Inland Water Transport for Mesopotamia.

Indian Expeditionary Force D. now became the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force, and the transfer of the administration to the War Office meant provision of equipment and supplies of every kind on a scale of magnificence unknown in India. It had for a long time been evident that the control of a campaign of such magnitude was beyond the scope of the Government of India, whose immediate resources had been drained by the Expeditionary Forces sent to France and East Africa, and who had not yet mobilised their entire resources as was done at a later date by the Indian Munitions Board.

In August the Army Commander, General Sir Percy Lake, retired and was succeeded by Major-General Stanley Maude (the late Sir Stanley Maude), who had come to Mesopotamia before the fall of Kut in command of the 13th all-British Division, and had succeeded General

Gorringe in command of the Tigris Corps. He arrived at Basra on the 28th August, and all heads of Departments were instructed to present themselves to him. I remember it was a particularly hot day, but belts and tunics were *de rigueur*. The General's spick-and-span appearance and his exceedingly well-polished brown boots were a striking contrast to what we had become accustomed to in the hot weather. He asked me a number of questions, and seemed satisfied that we were doing all that was possible to improve the base and the port, but said he must rely on us at Basra to do our best as he was a fighting man and intended to move G.H.Q. nearer the front.

He was to me a new type of man, and, apart from his great qualifications as a soldier, did not impress me as did Sir Percy Cox and General MacMunn.

In August also arrived Colonel Grey, the Deputy Director of Inland Water Transport, appointed by the War Office. The duty of this officer was to take over from the Principal Marine Transport Officer the management and control of the whole of the fleet of river steamers, and I accordingly handed over to him the report of my Committee the preparation of which had been additional to the work laid down for my Directorate. Colonel Grey thanked me and said that the reports would save him several months' work. He also volunteered the infor-

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

mation that neither he nor the War Office were aware of the existence of my Directorate, and he had come out fully prepared to take charge of and control everything to do with water transport, including the control and management of the seaport.

## CHAPTER IX.

THE primary requirements of a modern river port, whether for military or commercial purposes, are precisely the same, and consist in the maintenance of a deep, well-lighted and buoyed channel from the sea to the port, establishment of pilots' and harbour-masters' services, and laying down of moorings for vessels lying in the stream; provision of sufficient deep-water wharf accommodation equipped with cranes, sheds, and warehouses, floating pontoon landing-stages for river steamers and launches, adequate road and railway facilities to the interior; and, lastly, good management and abundant labour for general use at the port.

Basra possessed none of these attributes, and we had to accomplish in war-time what would ordinarily have taken years of gradual development.

### PILOTS AND HARBOUR-MASTERS.

The safety of vessels is of paramount consideration, and in making the passage from the sea to the port it is usual for incoming steamers

to take up a pilot, generally from a pilot vessel stationed outside the river, who conducts the vessel to the port and hands her over to a harbour-master for manœuvring to her allotted berth.

On the Shatt-el-Arab in the days of the Turk, pilotage had been for generations entrusted to certain Persian subjects—natives of the island of Kharag—who boarded ships at Bushire, and by practical experience and rule of thumb methods piloted them to Basra and back to Bushire. It was a leisurely daylight service as there were no lights on the river, but quite unsuitable for the rush of shipping brought by the war; and there were many complaints of unnecessary delays and accidents to transports by groundings on the bar. We therefore obtained and placed on the station outside the bar a steam pilot vessel commanded by a European master who took charge of the pilots and posted them to vessels as required. We retained and increased in number the Persian pilots, who now lived on the pilot vessel instead of at Bushire, and we laid down lighted buoys in the river, erected automatic tide-gauges at various points, and instructed the pilots from time to time as to the best track across the bar. By these arrangements vessels both arriving and departing from the port saved a good deal of time, and knew precisely the correct hour at which to cross the bar. It had been the custom for the pilots to take vessels right into

## HARBOUR-MASTERS' SERVICE

the harbour at Basra and there anchor them ; but I did not consider this a safe procedure in a crowded port, so we installed a service of European harbour-masters who took over from the pilots and were responsible for all movements in the port.

These men were officers of the Mercantile Marine, with master's certificates and preferably with experience in a similar capacity at other ports.

We picked up two of my Rangoon officers who were already serving with the Force, and one we brought back from France ; others we obtained from Indian ports. Later on, as more and still more transports and store-ships arrived, the number had to be increased, and I remember a very lively correspondence with General Maude, whose sanction was required to all appointments, because he argued that as there was to his knowledge only one harbour-master in Hong Kong, he could not understand why so many were required at Basra, the answer being that it was not a parallel case, Hong Kong being an open roadstead with no tortuous river to navigate, and the harbour-master corresponded with our Port Officer.

At first the harbour-masters used their own discretion in selecting berths for the anchoring of vessels, but when the marine survey of the port had been completed, the berths were marked and numbered, and orders were issued to the

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

harbour-masters by the Port Officer, as is usual in a commercial port.

We also prepared a code of port bye-laws, rules, and regulations on the lines of the Indian ports, which were authorised by the Army Commander and given the force of law. These were very useful, and necessitated obedience by commanders of transports and other vessels visiting the port.

### THE BAR.

The bar at the mouth of the Shatt-el-Arab River was a great impediment to shipping, limiting as it did the draught of vessels to nineteen feet at high water, and with the greatly increased number of vessels delays and groundings became so frequent that the authorities clamoured for some action to be taken. There was no great engineering problem involved, but nothing could be done without surveys, and under my direction very complete marine surveys were made of the bar and mouth of the river, which were compared with previous surveys dating from 1837. We then borrowed from Burma a drag suction dredger, and having decided on the proper line set her to work. Between July 1916 and April 1917 she removed some 400,000 tons of material and reduced the bar by one foot to eighteen inches, but she was too small to maintain the improvement, and was removed to do similar work on



## LAYOUT OF WHARVES

the Mohammerah bar, after which she returned to Rangoon. The work accomplished was, however, sufficient to prove the efficiency of the class of machine and ability to dredge the material of which the bar was composed. After the war two much larger dredgers of similar type were successful in dredging and maintaining a channel giving a depth at high water of thirty feet.

### PORT WORKS.

The layout and design of the wharves was a matter requiring considerable thought, as I was determined that when the war was over and peace once more reigned, the wharves would not be wasted, but would form an integral portion of the commercial port. It was obvious that the correct site for the wharves was at Ma'qil, where the deep-water channel ran close to the shore; and at an early date I persuaded the Political Department to expropriate a large area of land on the foreshore, as I had had previous experience of ports being hampered by foreshore land being in private possession.

My design comprised a line of wharves 2800 feet long (later extended to 4000 feet), equipped with cranes, sheds, roads, and railway lines. There were also five floating pontoon landing-stages for river steamers. The wharves were built of teak-wood imported from Burma at

nearly double the cost it should have been ; but as it was at that time the easiest material available and imperishable in water, we had no option in the matter.

The first berth was not opened for traffic until November 1916, due to the great delay in the arrival of the material from India. Thereafter progress was rapid, and when all the land in the vicinity had been reclaimed by dredgings, and the Supply and Transport and Ordnance Departments installed, there was not much to complain about. That our efforts were attended by some measure of success was testified to by Sir Arnold Wilson, who, in his second volume on Mesopotamia, observed :—

“ This is not the place to deal at greater length with the growth of the port of Basra or with the navigation of the Shatt-el-Arab. Here and here only in Iraq have developments proceeded generally on the lines laid down in 1919-1920. The results are financially satisfactory, and had it been possible to embark upon a programme of capital expenditure on irrigation works concurrently with moderate expenditure on agricultural research and animal husbandry, there is little doubt that they would have been even more remunerative. This much is certain, that the foresight of Sir George Buchanan, the original author of the scheme, and those associated with him, and of the Civil Administration, which made itself responsible in 1919-1920 for its completion, has been amply justified by results.”

## PORT TRAFFIC.

The organisation of the Port Traffic Department, thereby bringing order out of chaos in the handling of ships and their contents, was most successfully accomplished, largely due to the tact and expert knowledge of Mr P. H. Browne (now Sir Philip Browne), the Director of Port Traffic. Mr Browne had the advantage of knowing personally most of the masters of the transports and store-ships, having had dealings with them as a ship manager both in Rangoon and Calcutta. For a long time he refused to take a military title or to dress in anything but the spotless white ducks of commercial life, and as plain Mr Browne with a white topi and a plump smiling face he was held in the greatest respect, and wielded much authority, as he had no chief except myself; and, therefore, no stray General could give him orders. Later, when I.W.T. took over the department, Mr Browne had to fall into line, put on a khaki uniform, and become Lieut.-Colonel P. H. Browne, I.W.T., R.E., but he lost a great deal of his personality.

In a commercial port the shipping business is dependent upon two documents, the bill of lading, which is a contract entered into by the shipowner with the shipper to carry his goods to a certain destination and constitutes a document of title, and the ship's manifest, a

written statement giving an exact list of every item of cargo aboard, with marks, numbers, and names of consignees. The storing of the goods in the ship to the best advantage, so as to utilise the whole of the tonnage available, is done by experienced stevedores, and on the ship's arrival at its destination more stevedores superintend the discharge. The ship is not allowed to break bulk until the manifest or master's copies of the bill of lading has been deposited at the port office, and as discharge proceeds, tally clerks keep a careful register of the output which is finally compared with the manifest and bills of lading.

In war-time, as the ship was chartered by Government, a bill of lading was unnecessary, and it was impossible to prepare a proper manifest, or send the directors in Basra correct advice notes of the goods consigned to them, because no one knew exactly what was in the ship when she sailed. All the supply departments in India clamoured for priority space on every ship, and often when ready to sail the Marine Transport Officer had partially to unload and reload with some consignment that at the last moment he had been instructed must go by the first ship. The result, on arrival at Basra, was that heads of departments who had received shipping notes found their goods were not on board, and large consignments which were not on the manifest had no one to receive them.

## INEFFICIENCY AT BOMBAY

In dealing with plant and machinery this lack of system was particularly exasperating, as half the machine would come by one steamer and the remaining portion arrive weeks afterwards and be discovered by accident, the machine meanwhile being useless. I estimated that my various works were delayed completion for months through the impossibility of getting the necessary materials from Bombay, or through their being consigned to other departments and lost. The inefficiency at Bombay was largely due to the fact that there was no one in the Marine Transport Department who knew anything at all about loading ships economically, a work in itself requiring years of training. Bombay was a repetition of Basra, with amateurs trying to do the work of skilled men.

It had been impressed upon us that the shortage of shipping tonnage was daily growing a more serious question for the nation, and that we must turn round the ships as quickly as possible ; but it did not add to our zeal when we counted twenty store-ships which arrived at Basra carrying 54,912 tons of cargo, when, if properly loaded, they would have carried 70,000 tons, the difference being the equivalent of four store-ships. On one occasion a ship arrived loaded with heavy railway material and plant, and knowing we had no crane at Basra, the authorities thoughtfully sent with the cargo a derrick crane ; but as the crane was loaded at the bottom of the ship with

the heavy material on top, she had to return to Bombay to be unloaded and reloaded.

One story which reached us and caused considerable comment was about two ships—call them A. and B.—lying in an Indian port, A. being fitted to carry horses, and B. to carry mules. An order was received to ship mules in A. and horses in B. ; and although it seems incredible we were told that the ships were dismantled and the fittings in A. transferred to B. and *vice versa*, so that the precise orders could be carried out.

The commander of one of the Clan steamers told us of an incident that occurred to him personally, which illustrated the type of mind engaged in war work. His ship was taken up in Calcutta and ordered to go to Bombay to embark troops for East Africa. He went to the Port Officer's Department, Calcutta, and said he supposed he would fill up with coal, but was told he could only fill his bunkers. He, therefore, proceeded with an absolutely empty ship to Bombay, where he took in 1300 tons of coal which had been railed all the way from Calcutta to Bombay. These stories could be multiplied, and I was informed that such incidents were by no means confined to Indian ports.

I had discovered in the Force at Basra a Captain Thompson in the Disembarkation Department, who in private life was a practical shipowner, running and working his own ships for twenty years past. He knew all there was to

know about working ships, so I wrote to the Chief of the General Staff, India, and proposed that Captain Thompson should go to Bombay and take charge, as with a good man at each end much economy in tonnage could be effected. The C.G.S. replied that personally he had always been desirous of employing more shipping experts, and ultimately my suggestion was accepted with the best results.

At Basra the Director of Traffic (Mr Browne) and I prepared a scheme for the complete re-organisation of the port on the lines of an Indian commercial port, with the working of which we were familiar. The scheme was approved by the Army Commander, but we had no staff and were short of labour and appliances, so I despatched the Assistant Director of Traffic, Lieutenant Atkinson, to India to recruit. He returned with a staff of forty-five Europeans and Anglo-Indians to fill the posts of wharf superintendents, jetty inspectors, steamer supervisors, clerks, and accountants—in short, the ordinary staff for working a port. He also engaged in Bombay a first-class European stevedore, who arrived with 1000 men and contracted to do the whole of the discharging of steamers at a fixed rate per ton, and we imported from Rangoon a number of flat-decked barges for discharging from ships lying in the stream. The Force was supplied by means of store-ships from Bombay, reinforcement ships carrying troops and small

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

quantities of stores, colliers, ships from home, and ships with timber and railway materials, and the total tonnage dealt with was between 80,000 and 90,000 tons per month.

In June 1916, before my Directorate began to function, the total tonnage was 40,503, the daily discharge in tons 1350, and the average days in port per ship 47.6; while at the end of 1916, when the reorganisation had taken place but was not yet perfect, the total tonnage was 81,123, the daily discharge 2700, and the average days in port per ship 14, which, although an improvement, still left much to be desired. This better result was due to the employment of trained shipping experts and the provision of suitable wharves.

In February 1916 (as described elsewhere) the Port Traffic branch of my Directorate was handed over to the Inland Water Transport Department, but the Army Commander (General Maude) was good enough to recognise the work done, and the Deputy Quartermaster-General, in a memorandum dated 22nd March 1917, wrote :—

“ I am directed to convey to you and to Lieut.-Colonel P. H. Browne, the Army Commander's appreciation of the valuable services rendered in connection with the development of the Port Traffic Department since June 1916. The figures quoted in your final report, dated the 15th February 1917, relating to the tonnage dealt with during the month of January 1917, afford eloquent testimony to the results which have been achieved.”



## RIVER CONSERVANCY.

In due course the various surveys were sufficiently advanced to allow me to take stock and decide on the best course to pursue in order to improve navigation facilities.

Of all engineering works those connected with rivers are the most uncertain, and, therefore, the most fascinating; because, like a woman, you never know what she is going to do next. A river may one day be quietly pursuing its course to the sea, and the next be transformed by a flood into a raging lion careering away in another direction; or, to quote a simile of the late Sir Charles Munro, when discussing the river problems, "The Tigris is a very fickle lady who never sleeps two nights running in the same bed." Also like a woman you can very often coax where you cannot force, and time is necessary to ascertain her wishes and character.

The Rivers Tigris and Euphrates have gone through many thousand years of vicissitudes, and their present disintegration and ruin are attributable to man's destructive influence, extending over hundreds of years.

A well-behaved river usually increases in size as it progresses towards the sea, and the reduction in the size of the Tigris, from a fine broad river at Baghdad to a ditch below Amara, was entirely due to the large number of canals taking off from the river and discharging into the swamps.

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

The principal offender was the Chahala at Amara which opened out as a small irrigation ditch one hundred years ago, abstracted nearly half the water of the Tigris, and after irrigating in an extravagant manner a large area of country was lost in the swamps, miles from its head. Below Amara two canals, the Majar Kebir and the Michiriyah, took away nearly half of the remaining water, and to add to the gravity of the situation the Arabs had reclaimed large areas of land on both banks, thus still further reducing the sectional area and increasing the floods.

What, however, impressed me most when I had made my inspection and surveys, was the ease with which the Turks, when the British Force began their advance up the river, could, between Amara and Ezra's Tomb some miles above Qurna, have diverted the whole of the water of the Tigris into the swamps, thereby effectually stopping our military operations, probably indefinitely; and as it was not until the end of May 1915 that we had any aeroplanes with the Force, they could have carried out the work without our knowledge or interference. Sir William Willcocks in his book on 'The Irrigation of Mesopotamia,' which was written for the Turkish Government and was in their possession, pointed out that these canals "constituted a distinct menace to the existence of the river," as their beds were lower than that of the Tigris,

and he suggested remedies. The Turks thus missed an opportunity which would, undoubtedly, have altered the whole course of the campaign ; indeed Baghdad might to-day have remained in their possession.

Our function was to divert water from the canals into the Tigris, but before doing so the effect on the surrounding country and the people had to be considered, as the Political Officer reported that the two large canals irrigated 90,000 acres of land, and the people would resent with intense bitterness any interference with the flow of the water. Scientifically worked out irrigation schemes for each canal were obviously required, and as I had on my staff in the person of the late Colonel Lewis, an irrigation engineer of great experience, he took the matter in hand and prepared a comprehensive report on the subject. In the case of the Chahala the correct procedure would be to build a barrage with a lock for the passage of boats and regulators for flood and low water discharges ; but as any temporary works would affect the people prejudicially, we decided to take no action for the time being. At the Michiriyah a temporary weir was erected which proved a great success, and effected a permanent improvement in the depth of the river, giving an additional depth of water of nine inches to a foot at low water. At the same time an irrigation scheme was carried out which completely satisfied the inhabitants

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

of the area formerly irrigated by the canal. After I had left Mesopotamia the Majar Kebir was also dammed and a certain amount of water diverted into the Tigris from the Chahala with, I believe, satisfactory results.

Above Amara navigation difficulties were chiefly due to the frequently shifting shoals which required constant surveying, marking, and buoying, a work done daily on the Irrawaddy River in Burma.

A river flowing through an alluvial plain generally follows a winding course, with erosion on the concave side of the bend and accretion on the convex side. The main current crosses from one bend to the other, and shoaling is likely to occur at the crossings and in the straight stretches between the bend. The windings of the Tigris were extraordinary, especially between Kut and Baghdad, where the length direct was 103 miles and round the bends 214 miles, a percentage of meandering of 108. The river had also increased its length from Qurna to Baghdad between the years 1837 and 1907 by twenty-two miles. The river was a very difficult one to navigate, and how the first Expeditionary Force thought they were going to reach Baghdad passes my comprehension.

The Lower Euphrates was another example of the complete disintegration of what was once a noble river through callousness and neglect. The immediate problem was the pro-

vision of a passage for steamers across the Hammar Lake.

To cross the lake there were two channels, by either of which the main Euphrates could be reached—the Mazliq and the Akaika; the army chose the latter as being the most direct, but found near its mouth a solidly built irrigation dam which had to be blown up before the flotilla could pass through. I had inspected both channels, and for political reasons the Mazliq was the most suitable, as it passed through some of the richest country in Mesopotamia, and the dredging of a channel would assist irrigation and pacify a very turbulent people possessing many rifles and abundant ammunition.

The right course to pursue would have been to rebuild the Akaika dam, the destruction of which had thrown many hundreds of acres out of cultivation, and make the Mazliq Channel the navigable one, but this was not the shortest route and would have involved a great deal more dredging; so for military reasons, time being an important factor, I decided to take the Akaika route, and the Political Department paid the tribes compensation for the loss of irrigated land.

I had always considered the dredging of the channel an heroic but unnecessary work, and I am sure that not one of the Generals who airily ordered the cutting of a channel fifteen

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

miles long through the lake, had the slightest idea of the work involved.

A dredger by the river's brim, a simple dredger was to him, and it was nothing more, to paraphrase the poet Wordsworth.

There are, however, dredgers of various types and capacities, and the type used on the Hammar Lake was that known as a 'Suction cutter pipe-line,' that is to say, the soil or clay at the bottom of the river having been loosened by the cutter, is sucked up by very powerful centrifugal pumps and discharged through a pipe-line that may be half a mile or a mile in length.

The output of the dredger was 280,000 cubic feet per day of twenty-four hours, and every day a cut should have been made through the lake 280 feet long by 150 feet broad by 6 feet deep, so that in theory the channel would have been completed in ten to twelve months. Unfortunately, we did nothing of the kind. The dredger was to have begun work in March, but owing to mismanagement in Bombay was three months late in arriving at Basra, and this delay was disastrous, because, firstly, work began in the hot weather, and, secondly, instead of having three months' dredging on a high river when rapid progress could have been made, operations started on a low river, thereby doubling the amount of dredging required for the dredger's own flotation. I do not suppose ever before has a dredger worked under such strange cir-

## UNBEARABLE HEAT ON DREDGER

cumstances. A guard of armed men on board, crew's quarters protected with iron plating against Arab snipers, who all night and every night made the harmless dredger an object of attack. I had an excellent dredging master from the Clyde, who had worked for me in Burma, and a good crew, but the conditions were too strenuous, and we might as well have delayed operations until September.

During the whole of July the heat was unendurable; the thermometer registered 140 to 150 degrees in the stokehold, 126 in the engine-room, and 115 on deck, with a minimum at night of 99 degrees, and humidity of 80 per cent. There was no ice, a plague of mosquitoes and sandflies, and in a very short time the whole crew were in hospital suffering from fever or heat-stroke. Actually little progress was made until the beginning of September 1916, from which date all went well, and by the middle of October the dredger was about two and a half miles from her starting-point, and the spoil had been deposited in the form of a long bund on the left bank of the channel. Meanwhile the railway from Basra to Nasiriya was forging ahead and would be open before the end of the year, so the question arose as to the necessity in the interest of military operations for continuing the work, especially as I had use for the dredger elsewhere. Ultimately it was decided to withdraw the dredger and put her on to land reclamation at

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

Basra, and when that was completed she was to return to the lake, but as military reasons no longer existed, political reasons took their place, and it was decided to take in hand the alternative channel by the Mazliq, which would give great satisfaction to the tribes. The Akaika dam was to be rebuilt, and the bund thrown up by the dredger would form an integral part of one of Sir William Willcocks' irrigation schemes. In the first instance, the dredger returned to Basra and performed most excellent work in reclaiming land at Ma'qil, first by the use of her cables and winches in tearing up by the roots one by one the date palms on the ground to be used, and then by pumping up silt and sand in vast quantities from the river-bed, raising in a very short time a large area of land far above highest flood level. On her return to the lake it was decided to expedite the work, so I sent to Burma for her two sisters, and soon had three enormous dredgers operating simultaneously. After six and a half miles had been completed work was suspended by order of the War Office, but in February 1918 it was again started by the Inland Water Transport Department, after I had left Mesopotamia. They eventually finished the work so far as the actual cut was concerned by the end of February 1919, having excavated seven and a half million cubic yards and formed a portion of the proposed irrigation bund. Technically the work so far as it went was a success, but from



### THREE MILLION POUNDS WASTED

every other point of view it was a melancholy failure, and a typical example of how vast sums of money can be thrown away in time of war.

“ Perhaps the greatest change was brought about by the construction of a deep-water channel across the Hammar Lake. The magnitude and novelty of the scheme filled the tribesmen with wonder, and the sight of the great dredgers at work inspired awe. That a new river, 160 feet broad, 11 feet deep, and 25 miles long should have been made by the British within twelve months, for their convenience, suggested to the simplest minds a new and not unfruitful trend of thought. The Hammar Lake scheme was not new: it followed in its broad lines the plans of Nasir Pasha, the eponymous founder of Nasiriya, and its possibilities were thoroughly understood by the marsh-dwellers, to whom it would have brought, if completed, comfort and prosperity. It comprised three separate works :

- (1) The complete dredged channel from Bani Hutait to Bani Sa'id.
- (2) The provision of a permanent bund at the southern edge of the channel above high flood level, along the top of the spoil excavated from the dredged channel.
- (3) The building of the Ghabishiyah-Kubaish protective bund.

It was designed to convert a desolate marsh into one of the richest wheat-growing areas in Mesopotamia ; at a rough guess some 500,000 acres might have been reclaimed. But it never was completed : work was stopped shortly after the

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

Armistice, in February 1919, and within two years only a few long stretches of mud-banks emerging from the dreary waste of water remained to show what had been, and to suggest what might have been.

“Treated as a reclamation scheme, it could never have repaid the heavy cost of construction, which is officially estimated at the almost incredible figure of three million pounds. As a military measure to ensure communication by river with Nasiriya all the year round its construction was wholly unjustified, having regard to the ease with which a railway could be built across the desert and the time required to complete the cut, which could, moreover, have been maintained even by constant dredging for only six months in the year. It was sad, nevertheless, to witness the abandonment of a work on which so much labour, money, and enthusiasm had been lavished.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> ‘Mesopotamia, 1917-1920.’ By Sir Arnold Wilson.

## CHAPTER X.

EARLY in September, alarming reports reached us to the effect that the Turks, aided by German engineers, were attempting to divert the waters of the Tigris above Kut into the Hai, a work which if successful would in the absence of completed railways have spelt disaster to our force, and ended operations.

Aeroplane reconnaissance and photos showed that two jetties were being projected into the river near the mouth of the Hai, with a number of pontoons alongside, and Arab spies, euphemistically called agents, stated definitely that it was common knowledge that a barrage was being constructed with iron gabions filled with earth and cement and sunk into the river, and that a steamer and four barges were to be sunk to strengthen the barrage. The matter was referred to me for report, and after examining the evidence I said that the works indicated an attempt to divert the Tigris into the Hai; and that since the fall of Kut I had anticipated something of the kind might be tried in the low-water season, and had discussed the contingency with the

Chief of the General Staff in Simla the previous April. I should like to make investigations on the spot, and as I was about to leave on an inspection tour up the line I could, if desired, proceed as far as the Corps Headquarters at Fallahiya. This I was instructed to do, so, accompanied by Lieutenant Grant, R.E. (one of my own engineers from Rangoon), we left Basra in the old *Shushan* at 7 P.M., and travelling all night reached Amara on the 8th, where I met Major Cairncross, the Intelligence Officer, and went through his agents' secret reports, which were unanimous on the subject of the proposed barrage above Kut. Cairncross told me that the amount of thieving by Arabs at Amara was extraordinary, and amounted to thousands of rifles and many thousand rounds of ammunition.

On Tuesday evening, the 12th September, we reached Fallahiya, a few miles below Corps Headquarters, and received a message from General Cobbe, the Corps Commander, who had succeeded General Maude, that he would send his launch for us in the morning. The temperature was very different to that of Basra, being hot but dry in the day-time and very cold at night, with a sharp wind. The following morning we arrived at Corps Headquarters, and were given an E.P. tent in the camp, and spent most of the day examining the maps and photos taken at an elevation of 6000 feet, and arranging

## ATTEMPTED TIGRIS DIVERSION

for my engineer (Grant) to make an aerial reconnaissance the first thing in the morning.

The camp was well laid out, with a row of dug-outs at the edge of the river bank and tents behind the dug-outs. Although neither we nor the Turks were making a push, and the official report would be "All quiet on the Tigris front," there was considerable activity on both sides, and as this was my first experience in the war zone I found it exceedingly interesting. Our camp had been shelled and bombed by aeroplanes the day before our arrival, but with surprisingly few casualties: one shell had made a large hole between two tents, and another had just missed the valuable map tent, riddling it with holes. The 14th Division was heavily shelled the day of our arrival, one shell bursting inside a dug-out and killing four native servants, but otherwise doing little damage. In the evening the artillery were active on both sides, and General Swiney (the Brig.-General, Royal Engineers) and I walked to a place called Mason's Mounds, where we watched the shells bursting, but according to General Swiney neither side did much harm to the other. A few days previously we brought down a Turkish aeroplane, which fell inside the Turkish lines. Our batteries were ordered to blow it up; but although they fired over 400 shots they did not get one direct hit, and the aeroplane was dragged to safety by the Turks during the night.

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

I dined with the Brigadier-General, Royal Engineers, and went to my tent early, but got little sleep, as just across the river where the Black Watch were entrenched, rifle and machine-gun fire and explosions by trench mortars went on without ceasing. I rose at 4.30, and at 6.30 proceeded to the aerodrome where Lieut.-Colonel Tennant of the Royal Flying Corps was waiting with his machine. Grant, having been securely strapped in, disappeared in the direction of Kut, and I returned to camp for breakfast. In about an hour and a half Grant returned very pleased with himself, because, although he had never before been in the air he had flown well beyond Kut, taken notes and photographs, studied the works in progress, and generally obtained all the information I required. They had been fired upon by anti-aircraft guns, which had the precise elevation but the wrong direction. As a result of Grant's reconnaissance and other information, I was able to report that the scheme to divert the Tigris need not be taken seriously, as it would be necessary either to build a solid barrage from one bank of the Tigris to the other, or to carry out extensive excavations in the bed of the Hai, and any attempt in either of these directions could be stopped by our guns.

An attempt might be made to render the Tigris impassable for navigation by sinking steamers and barges, and any work on the left bank and

## BLACK WATCH CAMP

mooring of ships in the navigable channel should be prevented. I anticipated that the jetties being built would be swept away at the first rise in the river, and this was the case. General Cobbe was very satisfied at the result of our visit and said that Grant had seen more than his own professional observers. Later, he (Grant) was awarded the Military Cross.

In the evening I again went for a walk with General Swiney, and saw the 19th Brigade march into the trenches to relieve the 21st, and watched the shells bursting on the other side of the river. We were using 18 and 60-pounders, high explosive and shrapnel.

The next morning we left by the Corps Commander's launch for Fallahiya, where the *Shushan* was waiting below the bridge of boats. I walked across the bridge to the Black Watch camp and found them settling down for twenty days' fatigue work after their ten days in the trenches. My son was not with them, being in India recuperating from an attack of enteric fever. I spent several hours with Colonel Wauchope, and on asking him what the tremendous activity had been two nights ago he said that the Turks had so many trench mortars that for some time it was thought that a serious Turkish offensive was beginning. He told me that the total strength of his battalion was under 450, and that of all the drafts which came up he had never received even 50 per cent, the remainder

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

being wasted away by sickness and other causes in Basra and on the way up the line. He also complained, as everyone else has complained, about the shortage and quality of the rations.

On Saturday, the 16th September, we left for Basra, and as I had to make a number of inspections on the way we took our time, and soon after passing Shaikh Sa'ad we went ashore to shoot sand grouse, which, in this region, are literally in hundreds of thousands, and fly in huge flocks resembling clouds. At about eight in the morning they leave their feeding grounds and fly from one side of the river to the other, circling round and round in twos and threes, or in flocks, and the procedure is to sit on the bank and shoot them as they fly over. We got a good bag and found them a welcome addition to bully beef and stores. They are slightly smaller than partridge, but very handsome birds, not unlike the Scotch grouse in their colouring.

In the Mendeliyah reach of the Tigris was one of my officers making surveys and placing buoys, and we saw three vessels aground, not one of which with ordinary care should have got into such a position. A little farther on we met a motor lighter in flames, and the crew and guard on shore watching the fire.

Sunday, the 17th, we arrived at Amara, and on calling on Major Cairncross I found an Arab Sheikh drinking whisky-and-soda, which appeared



## THE MICHIRIYAH CANAL

very astonishing, as the Arabs are supposed to be strict Mohammedans and forbidden to take alcohol. The chief was a particularly fine-looking man, tall and strong, with a face like a hawk, and, although the head of one of the war-loving tribes, was supposed to be friendly. Below Amara we stopped for a couple of hours to shoot partridges, which were plentiful but strong on the wing. We bagged a few brace.

Our next stop was at the Michiriyah Canal, where we were building a weir to preserve the Tigris water, and thence on through the Narrows where a dredger was at work and an officer making surveys and directing operations. At Qurna more surveys were being made, especially one on the site of a proposed new wharf with a view to taking sea-going vessels up the river to this point.

We arrived at Basra in the evening of the 18th September, having had a most pleasant change from the worry and heat of the base.

## CHAPTER XI.

By the middle of December 1916 General Maude was ready to take the offensive on the Tigris front, and to achieve what Sir John Nixon had vainly attempted the previous year, but the contrast in the forces at the disposal of the respective Generals was so great that, what had been in the one case a gamble, was in the other as near a certainty as is possible, where war is concerned.

General Sir John Nixon had under his command on all fronts two infantry divisions, a cavalry division, corps-troops, some batteries of artillery, and five aeroplanes, a strength all told of about 23,000 combatants. Of these the Tigris front under General Townshend accounted for 10,500 rifles, 1100 sabres, with 30 guns, 45 machine-guns, and 5 aeroplanes. The Force was lamentably short of both land and water transport, medical units, supplies, equipment, and even the ordinary requirements of life for the troops engaged. The naval flotilla consisted of one new river gunboat, two armoured tugs, an old paddle-steamer fitted with guns, and some converted

## GENERAL MAUDE'S STRENGTH

barges, while behind the front was a precarious line of communication 285 miles long to Kut, and a base incapable of dealing with the supplies and reinforcements arriving daily. Opposed to this force on the Tigris there were estimated to be 13,000 Turks with 38 guns, but according to Turkish figures the number was 20,000 men with 52 guns, besides several thousand Arabs in two tribal divisions.

General Maude had in December 1916 a total strength on the various fronts of over 120,000 men and 83,000 followers, while on the Tigris front alone there were two army corps and a cavalry division, making a total of 45,000 rifles and 3500 sabres. The Force was equipped with 174 guns, 200 machine-guns, trench mortars, Lewis-guns, aeroplanes, wireless, in fact, all the paraphernalia of modern warfare ; medical units, field ambulances, and hospitals were abundant ; river and land transport, including mechanical transport, was adequate, and the construction of railways had greatly facilitated transport operations. There were ample reserves of supplies and ammunition, and troops and drafts in considerable numbers on the line of communication ; a fleet of ten powerfully armed new river gun-boats patrolled the river, thus assuring the line of communication, and at Basra a modern port was in course of construction and development. The Force was in every respect a magnificent one, equipped and organised regardless

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

of expense; the men well fed and clothed. One cannot but reflect that if the unfortunate Sir John Nixon had commanded such a force and organisation there might have been no tragedy in Mesopotamia.

Opposite to General Maude on the Tigris was a badly equipped and ill-fed Turkish Army, estimated by General Maude at 20,000 rifles and 70 guns, but according to the Turkish General Staff there were in reality only 10,500 men and 50 guns—that is to say that, taking General Maude's own estimate, he was more than four times the superior of the Turk in numbers, and, although there were a few thousand men in the garrison at Baghdad and a possibility of men being rushed to the Tigris from other fronts, it seemed unlikely that in the immediate future the Turk would even be able to replace casualties.

How best to utilise General Maude and his army had been for some time a matter under consideration, both at home and in India. His Majesty's Government, bearing in mind the débacle of Kut, were very chary of taking any risk, and there was a suggestion that the whole army should retire to Amara, but it was pointed out that such a withdrawal would bring every Arab in the country out against us. Finally, General Maude was informed that no fresh advance to Baghdad was to be contemplated, as he had not, nor for an indefinite time was he

## TURKISH TRENCH SYSTEM

likely to have available, the number of troops necessary to seize and hold the city.

He was to keep his force as far forward as possible, but severe losses were not to be incurred. Within these limitations General Maude had a free hand, but there is no evidence that when operations began General Maude had any idea that circumstances would arise making it necessary that he should occupy Baghdad.

It is not within the province of this work to describe military operations, full details of which are given in the Official History, so I will confine myself to broad facts, stating the principal events which occurred during the advance, with names and dates of actions.

The positions of the Turk on the Tigris were much the same as they had been for months past. On the left bank they still held the Sannaiyat position, protected on one flank by the Suwaika Marsh, and on the other by the river, and they had built up in the rear of the Sannaiyat trenches a trench system of immense strength, extending for a distance of fifteen miles, as well as entrenchments along the river banks to prevent the enemy crossing. On the right bank, the trenches extended from a point on the Tigris three miles north-east of Kut, as far as the River Hai, two miles below its junction with the Tigris, and they had a bridge across the Hai and one across the Tigris seven miles above Kut. Our trenches on the left bank at Sannaiyat were about a

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

hundred yards from the Turkish front line, and on the right bank our advanced line ran from Magasis southwards to within about two miles of the Turkish position at the Khadhaira Bend, and five miles from Kut. General Maude considered that his force was better situated strategically than the Turk, whose communications were in prolongation of his battle front, and he decided—first, to secure possession of the Hai; second, to clear away the Turkish trench system still remaining on the right bank of the Tigris; thirdly, to attack without ceasing, until the Sannaiyat position was either abandoned, or weakened, to counter our strikes against his communications. And, lastly, to cross the Tigris as far west as possible and so completely sever the enemy's communications. The stage was set and all that was required was fine weather, because a few hours' heavy rain automatically reduced the ground to a state that brought all operations to a standstill.

The offensive opened on the night of 13th December with a bombardment of the Sannaiyat position and a night march by infantry and cavalry to the Hai River, which was crossed at Atab, eight miles below Kut. Within a few days we were firmly established both sides of the Hai and pressing the Turks against their Hai bridge-head, but an attempt on the 20th December to cross the Tigris above the Shumran peninsula was unsuccessful. During the next fortnight

## MAUDE OPENS OFFENSIVE

heavy and continuous rain fell which flooded large areas of country, limiting our operations to the consolidation of our position on the Hai.

At the end of the first week in January the position at Sannaiyat was unchanged, but we held the whole of the right bank except the Khadhaira Bend and the Hai bridge-head, where the Turks were strongly entrenched. Operations began again at the beginning of January, and in accordance with his programme General Maude concentrated on clearing the Turk from the Khadhaira Bend and the Hai bridge-head, and as it was clear no bloodless victory could be attained, he had received permission to incur casualties up to 25 per cent. For two weeks our troops had been advancing step by step accompanied by constant bombardment of the enemy's position, and by the 8th January were ready for the assault, while to prevent the enemy bringing up reinforcements the Hai was bombarded, and at Sannaiyat four raiding parties of two officers and thirty men entered the Turkish trenches, all the officers being killed, and the greater number of the rank and file.

After much severe hand-to-hand fighting the objective was attained on the 9th January, and the final assault was fixed for the 19th January, but during the night of the 18th the enemy, under cover of rifle and machine-gun fire, retired across the river ; our casualties during the eleven days fighting amounting to over 1600. There now

only remained the reduction of the Hai salient, that extensive trench system which the Turks held astride the Hai River, to complete their eviction from the Tigris right bank, and in face of stubborn opposition and repeated counter-attacks steady progress was made.

Our cavalry division had meanwhile occupied the town of Hai and remained there several days. The town and district were notorious as being the headquarters of tribes who had consistently massacred our wounded and plundered our dead, so it was not to be wondered that when the cavalry retired they were set upon by the tribes in force. A general mêlée followed, during which a British officer was killed and his body stripped naked by the Arabs in sight of all his comrades.

Fierce fighting in the Hai salient continued, the Turks resisting grimly and counter-attacking with great gallantry ; but our superior strength and persistent attacks resulted in the Turks retreating on the 4th February to the liquorice factory on the right bank of the Tigris and to an entrenched position on the right bank at the Dahra Bend, some miles above Kut. On the 10th February our troops occupied the Kut liquorice factory, the walled village on the right bank held by Townshend during the siege ; but the enemy was by no means beaten, as he retired to another elaborate trench system farther west at the loop of the river known as the Dahra Bend, and brought reinforcements over from the



## HEROISM OF INFANTRY

left bank. By the 16th of February the Dahra Bend was also cleared of the enemy, and the same night torrential rain fell, flooding out our trenches and causing a captive Turkish officer to remark that they had been praying for this rain for two months to hinder our advance; now it had come too late.

“ Thus terminated a phase of severe fighting brilliantly carried out. To eject the enemy from this horseshoe bend bristling with trenches and commanded from across the river on three sides by hostile batteries and machine-guns, called for offensive qualities of a high standard on the part of the troops. That such good results were achieved was due to the heroism and determination of the infantry and to the close and ever-present support rendered by the artillery, whose accurate fire was assisted by efficient aeroplane observation.”<sup>1</sup>

The enemy had now been driven entirely from the right bank of the Tigris, but still held a very strong position on the left bank, protected from Sannaiyat to Shumran by the Tigris. At Sannaiyat in particular, the successive lines of trenches, which for a whole year had been strengthened until they had become a veritable fortress, barred the way on a narrow front to any advance.

In accordance with his plan of campaign, General Maude now decided to cross the river

<sup>1</sup> General Maude's despatch.

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

as far west as possible and attack the enemy on the left bank, at the same time engaging his attention at Sannaiyat and along the river between Sannaiyat and Kut.

I now had an opportunity of observing for myself operations in progress, as I had occasion to go up to the front to see General Maude. I left Basra on the 18th February, accompanied by Lieutenant Grant, passed Amara on the 20th, and arrived at Marching Post No. 2 at 5.30 P.M., where we tied up for the night. It was nearly dark, but I took a gun and went ashore with Grant, hoping to get a duck for our dinner. Presently we heard the well-known honk of geese and a number of birds flying very high came right over my head. I bagged one, which dropped dead at my feet, and that night we had most excellent roast goose for dinner, which made a very welcome change from our ordinary rations.

We arrived at Shaikh Sa'ad, which was packed with stores of all kinds, on the afternoon of the 22nd, and there awaited orders, as I had heard that General Maude wished to see me.

Going up the line one is impressed with the ubiquity of the native of India: everywhere he is hard at work, either in a labour corps, or as a sweeper, dooley bearer, saice, follower, cook, motor driver, or mess servant, and without him it would be difficult to carry on the campaign. Another matter that impresses one is the sordid

## DESERTIONS OF INDIANS

monotony of war : all the way up the line there is nothing to see except steamers packed with stores and troops going up, and steamers packed with wounded coming down.

We dined at the Ordnance Mess, where the news from the front was discussed. We seemed to be making good progress, but our casualties were estimated at about 800 per brigade—that is to say, about 20 per cent. We were told that there were a certain number of desertions amongst the Indian troops, and at Sannaiyat, where the trenches were only eighty yards apart, a sepoy tucked a Lewis-gun under his arm and walked over to the enemy. The Turks were supposed to encourage desertions, but for some unaccountable reason one day they took a number of Indians who had deserted, stripped them of their uniforms, and then bayoneted them, which so exasperated the Indians that there were no more desertions.

On Friday, the 23rd February, I received a telephone message at 9 A.M. saying that the Army Commander (General Maude) wished me to go to advanced G.H.Q., situated on the right bank of the Tigris at Arab Village some four miles below Fallahiya and lunch with him, so I left with Grant in a Ford car about ten o'clock. We drove past Twin Canals, a most desolate spot, and past the Sinn banks, scenes of severe fighting during the attempt to relieve Kut, and reached advanced G.H.Q. at 11.30, where we met

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

General Knox, the Deputy Quartermaster-General, who took me to the Army Commander's tent. I found General Maude in an 80-lb. tent, in which he both worked and slept. He said he had received a telegram from Sir Percy Cox in connection with work on the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates, and after some discussion I said I would write him a memorandum on the subject. At one o'clock we went into the Mess tent, where General Money, the Chief of the General Staff, the Military Secretary, and two aide-de-camps were waiting for lunch. An A.D.C. apologised for the bareness of the tent, but the previous night some Arabs (whose audacity has no limit) had actually passed through a double line of sentries and raided the Army Commander's Mess tent. They were discovered and shot at on their way out while climbing through the wire, but they escaped, leaving one chair cushion bespattered with blood and pierced with bullets.

After lunch I expressed a wish to see something of the fighting then going on, so General Money told me to take the car to and across the Hai River. We found our way across the desert, past the famous Dujaila Redoubt and Mansour's Tomb to Atab on the Hai, which we crossed by the bridge of boats, and a few miles farther we were in the battle area, where were concentrated the whole of the Third Corps. We had an excellent view of Kut and the operations in progress, and it was interesting to watch the fine

## TIGRIS CROSSED AT SHUMRAN

modern Red Cross ambulance cars coming along filled with wounded, who had just received their first field dressing, and to compare them with the barbarous springless A.T. carts previously used in the campaign.

The immediate military operation was the crossing of the Tigris at Shumran. To deceive the Turk several feints were made opposite Kut and Magasis, and the deception was so good that the enemy moved troops and guns into the Kut peninsula, and were unable to transfer them to the actual point of crossing in time to be of use.

The site finally selected was at the south end of the Shumran peninsula, where three ferrying-places were selected preparatory to throwing a bridge across. During the ferrying almost incredible feats of valour were performed. The river was 400 yards wide with a current running five knots. The first trip, where the Norfolks crossed, was a complete surprise, the crossing being effected with few casualties, but the two lower ferries were met with a withering machine-gun fire. One by one the rowers were killed or wounded, and before seven o'clock 110 out of 230 men had been hit. These ferries were then closed and the work concentrated on No. 1, and when we were there in the afternoon of the 23rd, the pontoon bridge was in course of construction. By nightfall one infantry division was across and another division ready to follow.

We next visited Sannaiyat, where the Highland

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

Brigade, amongst others of the 7th Division, had been holding the Turk at bay for over a year. On the 22nd February a vigorous assault had been made on the Turkish trench system, and after terrific hand-to-hand fighting with attack and counter-attack, and trenches being taken and retaken every hour, the first two lines had been securely occupied. We witnessed an intense bombardment for ten minutes, when the whole line was alive with shell and rifle-fire, and we learned that the Turks third and fourth lines had been taken. The end was then near; the Turks were aware of the crossing at Shumran and did not wish to be caught in a trap. On the 24th the fifth and sixth lines and the Nakhailat and Sawada positions fell with little opposition, and the capture of Sannaiyat, which the Turks believed to be impregnable, had been accomplished after heavy losses on both sides.

On the 24th of February, as the result of General Maude's operations, the Turks had evacuated the whole of their positions from Sannaiyat to Kut and were retreating towards Baghdad. The same evening our gunboats proceeded up-stream, anchored off Kut, which they found deserted and in ruins, and landed a party which hoisted the Union Jack. General Maude was now in somewhat of a quandary. His natural instincts as a soldier were to make the most of his victory and to pursue the enemy even to Baghdad, but his definite instructions

from home were that no fresh advance to Baghdad was to be contemplated. In these circumstances he telegraphed to London asking whether H.M. Government desired to modify those orders, and said that until he received a reply he would follow up the retreating enemy, but do nothing which would prevent him adjusting his position in accordance with further orders. On the 28th of February London replied that, subject to the security of his force and the capacity of his communications, he was to exploit his success to the fullest extent. The pursuit of the enemy by our cavalry, infantry, artillery, and naval flotilla began on the 25th of February. Contact was made with the rearguard about eight miles above Shumran, and after severe fighting he was driven back to his main position. On the 26th of February our force reached Baghaila, forty-six miles above Kut by river, and an attempt was made to intercept the enemy by a forced march across eighteen miles of desert; but both main body and rearguard managed to evade us, the latter entrenching themselves at a hair-pin bend in the river known as the Nahr-al-Kalek, fourteen miles by river above Baghaila.

The Royal Navy now came into its own, and, like unleashed hounds, the gunboat flotilla proceeded up-stream full speed ahead in advance of the army. Captain Nunn, the Senior Naval officer, led the procession in the *Tarantula*, followed by the *Mantis*, *Moth*, *Gadfly*, and

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

*Butterfly*. After passing Baghaila they came under the fire of the 4-inch guns in the *Firefly*, which had been captured by the Turks from us after the disastrous battle of Ctesiphon. Steaming ahead the enemy's rearguard position was reached, and at once the gunboats came under a devastating fire from guns, machine-guns, and rifles, fired at close range, to which they replied with all their weapons.

It was difficult to see how the gunboats escaped destruction. The river channel was unknown and narrow, making navigation difficult, and at any time a ship might have gone aground and blocked the fairway, while due to the sharpness of the hair-pin bend the ships were being fired at from three directions at close range for a distance of five miles. The flotilla was suffering heavy losses in personnel, and the *Moth* had been holed below the water-line and hit eight times by shell. But, nothing daunted, Captain Nunn pushed ahead past the Turkish rearguard, and on reaching the rear of the main body opened fire with every available weapon, striking such terror into the enemy that they became demoralised and were unable to return the fire. Several of the enemy's vessels ahead were either captured or sent aground, including the *Firefly* and the steamer *Basra*, which contained some hundred enemy casualties, a few of our own wounded who had been taken prisoners in the recent fighting, and some unwounded Turks and



## FLIGHT OF TURKS

Germans. By this time night had fallen, and as the gunboats were far ahead of our troops and barely out of range of the Turkish main army, Captain Nunn anchored for the night and took stock of his casualties.

A more stirring example of courage and enterprise it would be difficult to find, and the action, moreover, demonstrated how a fleet of gunboats in a river campaign could lengthen the arm of the attacking force by doubling its striking power. The effect of the naval action was to turn the orderly retreat of the Turkish Army into a panic-stricken flight; and the Turkish Commander, realising that his communications would be cut, made for Aziziya during the night, a march of twenty miles.

Our advancing aeroplanes and troops the next morning found the roads littered with dead and wounded, men and animals, guns, ammunition wagons and stores, and small groups of starving and exhausted men lying on the ground, soon to have their throats cut by the marauding Arabs.

On the 27th of February the cavalry division and the gunboats resumed the pursuit, and Aziziya was reached and occupied on the 1st March, the Turks having retreated to Lajj, a march by road of twenty miles. At Aziziya we were fifty-five miles from Kut by direct road and fifty-one miles from Baghdad also by road, the river journey being just double the distance.

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

Here the pursuit was broken off and a compulsory halt made, as we had outrun the line of communication, and fresh arrangements were necessary for the feeding of two army corps and a cavalry division.

The advance base depot was still at Shaikh Sa'ad, which was 144 miles from Aziziya by river, and as the great store depots on the Hai were now rendered useless their contents would have to be sent back by the light railway to Shaikh Sa'ad before they could be forwarded to the front.

General Maude was anxious to push on, but General MacMunn said that if the army continued to advance it would not be long before they would be obliged to stop for lack of food, and he asked for five days to regroup his steamers and arrange for new supply dumps. At the end of that time the various links in the 387-mile chain between Basra and Aziziya had been readjusted, and the army continued to enjoy full rations without troubling to inquire where they came from. Aziziya now became the advance base, and there General Maude established his headquarters.

On 6th March the advance continued, and on approaching Lajj the Turkish rear-guard were found in an entrenched position, very difficult to locate. The cavalry soon became hotly engaged, and the 13th Hussars made a brilliant charge right into the Turkish trenches,

## CROSSING THE DIYALA

sustaining many casualties. The Turks evidently determined to make a stand at Lajj, but they slipped away in the night and marched to Ctesiphon, where a strong entrenched position had been prepared, but the rapidity of our advance again caused them to retreat, this time to the Diyala River, only ten miles from Baghdad by road.

On the 7th March contact was made with the enemy on the line of the Diyala River, and on the same night attempts were made by means of pontoons to cross the river, which was here about 120 yards wide, with steep banks. It was bright moonlight and the Turks had machine-guns and rifles concealed in houses on the opposite bank. Five successive pontoons were launched, but one after the other were stopped by a withering fire, all the crews being killed. The first attempt had failed at a cost of sixty-four casualties.

The second attempt was made the following night by four separate columns, and, although after losing 140 men a small number got across, the attack may be said to have failed again. A third attempt was made on the night of the 9th March and was successful; a pontoon bridge was quickly put in position and our troops streamed across in large numbers.

Meanwhile, on the 8th March, the Tigris had been bridged at Bawi, eight miles below the Diyala, and troops landed on the right

bank of the river. General Maude was now ready to advance on Baghdad.

The Hertfordshire Yeomanry were the first to enter on the left bank, and the Black Watch occupied the railway station on the right bank. I was told that the first man actually to enter was a private of the Black Watch who had lost his way and, to the mutual surprise of the regiment and himself, was found in a shop drinking coffee surrounded by Arabs and in blissful ignorance of his whereabouts.

Another story concerning the Black Watch was told me by an officer in the Intelligence Branch. General Maude had issued very plain instructions as to the conduct of any officer or man who was so unfortunate as to be made a prisoner of war, and amongst other documents found in baggage wagons captured from the Turks during the pursuit was the verbatim examination in English of a man in the Black Watch who had been taken prisoner. Asked how many men the British had behind the front line the man replied, "thousands and thousands." Asked who was the General Officer Commanding, "He didn't know." "Was it Sir Charles Monro?" "He didn't know, it might be Lord Kitchener." To all questions he gave foolish or evasive replies, and at last the interpreter said, "Do you think this officer who is examining you is a b——y fool?" "No," replied Jock, "but he seems to think I am."

I was told the man was recaptured and sent for by General Maude, who rewarded him on the spot.

For over a fortnight before we entered Baghdad the Turks had been removing stores and articles of military value and destroying what they could not move. The great German wireless station, constructed for direct communication with Berlin, had been blown up a few hours before our entry, along with railway engines, aeroplanes, and other material and plant. No sooner had the Turks retired than a state of anarchy broke out, with Kurds and Arabs looting the bazaars and robbing and murdering indiscriminately. Infantry guards were, however, soon marching through the streets, order was restored, and the Union Jack hoisted over the city.

The Turkish Commander (Khalil Pasha) was now in desperate straits. He had failed to hold us back by the preparation of any very strongly entrenched position on which he could fall back; reinforcements from Persia had been unable to reach him, and his total effective strength on the 10th March comprised 500 sabres, 9000 rifles, and 48 guns, according to Turkish accounts (although British estimates increased these figures by 50 per cent). General Maude, on the other hand, by means of steady reinforcements, still maintained his original strength of 46,000 rifles and sabres and 174 guns. An overwhelming superiority, but General

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

Maude had to bear in mind that to retain Baghdad he might have to contend against fresh Turkish forces and to occupy strong positions on the Diyala, Tigris, and Euphrates.

Soon after sunset on the 10th March Khalil Pasha held a council of war, when he most reluctantly decided to abandon Baghdad and retire along the Tigris to the north.

It is curious that the Turk throughout the campaign never made use of his natural allies—the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates. I have already shown how easily the Turks could have stopped us at the beginning of the campaign by converting the Tigris into a dry ditch, and in a contrary way the occupation of Baghdad could have been seriously delayed and possibly prevented if arrangements had been made scientifically to flood the surrounding country when the Tigris was high. Nothing, however, had been attempted. Khalil Pasha and his army retired in the night, and General Maude and a portion of his army entered Baghdad on the 11th March.

In the afternoon the gunboat flotilla proceeding up-stream in line formation caused a tremendous impression on the community. Crowds of people assembling on the banks gazed at the, to them, novel spectacle anchored off the British Residency. Muhammad Amin, in 'Baghdad and The Story of its Last Fall,' paid a striking tribute to the British Army by observing that "though this

## FALL OF BAGHDAD

was the thirtieth time Baghdad had fallen to a conqueror, never before had the event passed off so quietly."

The Tigris army had been looking forward eagerly to entering Baghdad, but comparatively few of the troops entered the city, as military operations had to be undertaken as soon as possible in various directions. The retreating enemy had entrenched himself in a strong position some twenty miles north of the city, and as the high flood season approached it became of the very first importance to obtain control of the embankments for many miles up-stream, to prevent the Turks hindering further operations by releasing the waters and flooding large areas of land surrounding the town.

Baghdad had fallen, but the campaign was far from over, and some of the fiercest fighting and heaviest casualties took place during the advances on the Tigris, Euphrates, and Diyala. The enemy had received considerable reinforcements, and it soon became apparent that General Maude's force, which appeared of overwhelming superiority for the capture of Baghdad alone, was not a man too large for the subsequent operations undertaken simultaneously on several fronts. Sir Arnold Wilson in 'Loyalties' aptly observes: "General Maude's reputation as a soldier will, I am confident, rest rather on his achievements subsequent to the capture of Baghdad than the events leading up to that

historic event. The direction of the earlier operations was at times brilliant, but the success achieved was, in the opinion of some military critics, due less to strategy or tactics than to the preponderance of men and guns at his disposal. In the operations beyond Baghdad this superiority in men and guns was far less marked. He was opposed by a Turkish Commander, Ali Ihsan Pasha, scarcely less accomplished than himself and by troops whose military qualities were, as has been shown, of a very high order. To advance within two months a distance of 200 miles from his advanced base, organise and maintain three separate forces operating in different directions, without the co-operation he had been told to expect from the Russians, was a masterly achievement. . . . Our battle casualties since operations began on the Tigris below Kut (to end of October 1917) had been about 18,000 out of a total fighting force of about 45,000, or 40 per cent. It was a high price to pay for our victories, however complete, but considerably less than the toll that was paid on the Tigris in the previous year in the vain attempt to relieve Kut."

In the light of what occurred one can visualise the terrible disaster that awaited Generals Nixon and Townshend had they been so unfortunate as to reach Baghdad with their utterly inadequate force.

The news of the fall of Baghdad was received



## PROCLAMATION TO PEOPLE

with satisfaction in London, but was tempered by the memory of the past. General Maude and General MacMunn were at once made Knight Commanders of the Bath, and never were honours more richly deserved. General Maude was the fighting man and General MacMunn the administrator, and I do not think it too much to say that without General MacMunn it would have been difficult if not impossible for General Maude to have reached Baghdad.

It was General Maude's intention to issue a proclamation to the inhabitants as soon as he entered the city, but he was instructed by His Majesty's Government to await instructions, and in due course he received the text of a proclamation to be issued on the 19th March in his name. This document, which had been drafted by the late Sir Mark Sykes, was in the following terms, and Sir Arnold Wilson in 'Loyalties' observes that "few more remarkable documents can have received the endorsement of a British Cabinet."

### TO THE PEOPLE OF BAGHDAD WILAYAT.

*In the name of my King, and in the name of the peoples over whom he rules, I address you as follows :—*

*Our military operations have as their object the defeat of the enemy and the driving of him from*

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

*these territories. In order to complete this task, I am charged with absolute and supreme control of all regions in which British troops operate ; but our armies do not come into your cities and lands as conquerors or enemies, but as liberators.*

*Since the days of Hulagu your city and your lands have been subject to the tyranny of strangers, your palaces have fallen into ruins, your gardens have sunk in desolation, and your forefathers and yourselves have groaned in bondage. Your sons have been carried off to wars not of your seeking, your wealth has been stripped from you by unjust men and squandered in distant places.*

*Since the days of Midhat, the Turks have talked of reforms, yet do not the ruins and wastes of to-day testify the vanity of those promises ?*

*It is the wish not only of my King and his peoples, but it is also the wish of the great Nations with whom he is in alliance, that you should prosper even as in the past, when your lands were fertile, when your ancestors gave to the world literature, science, and art, and when Baghdad city was one of the wonders of the world.*

*Between your people and the dominions of my King there has been a close bond of interest. For two hundred years have the merchants of Baghdad and Great Britain traded together in mutual profit and friendship. On the other hand, the Germans and Turks, who have despoiled you and yours, have for twenty years made Baghdad a centre of power from which to assail the power of the British*

## PROCLAMATION TO PEOPLE

*and the Allies of the British in Persia and Arabia. Therefore the British Government cannot remain indifferent as to what takes place in your country now or in the future, for in duty to the interests of the British people and their Allies the British Government cannot risk that being done in Baghdad again which has been done by the Turks and Germans during the War.*

*But you, people of Baghdad, whose commercial prosperity and whose safety from oppression and invasion must ever be a matter of closest concern to the British Government, are not to understand that it is the wish of the British Government to impose upon you alien institutions. It is the hope of the British Government that the aspiration of your philosophers and writers shall be realised, and that once again the people of Baghdad shall flourish, enjoying their wealth and substance under institutions which are in consonance with their sacred laws and their racial ideals. In Hejaz the Arabs have expelled the Turks and Germans who oppressed them, and proclaimed the Sheriff Hussain as their King, and his Lordship rules in independence and freedom, and is the Ally of the Nations who are fighting against the power of Turkey and Germany; so, indeed, are the noble Arabs, the Lords of Koweit, Nejd, and Asir.*

*Many noble Arabs have perished in the cause of Arab freedom at the hands of those alien rulers, the Turks, who oppressed them. It is the determination of the Government of Great Britain and*

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

*the Great Powers allied to Great Britain, that these noble Arabs shall not have suffered in vain. It is the hope of the British people and the Nations in alliance with them that the Arab race may rise once more to greatness and renown among the peoples of the Earth, and that it shall bind itself together to this end in unity and concord.*

*O people of Baghdad, remember that for twenty-six generations you have suffered under strange tyrants who have ever endeavoured to set one Arab House against another in order that they might profit by your dissensions. This policy is abhorrent to Great Britain and her Allies, for there can be neither peace nor prosperity where there is enmity and misgovernment. Therefore I am commanded to invite you, through your nobles and elders and representatives, to participate in the management of your own civil affairs in collaboration with the political representatives of Great Britain who accompany the British Army, so that you may be united with your kinsmen in North, East, South, and West in realising the aspirations of your Race.*

The flowery periods in the proclamation caused us considerable amusement in Mesopotamia, but no one for a moment credited either General Maude or Sir Percy Cox with the authorship. At home Mr Devlin, an Irish member, asked in the House of Commons whether the Government were prepared to do immediately for Ireland what Sir Stanley Maude had been authorised

## COMMENTS ON PROCLAMATION

to proclaim they were resolved to do for the Arab race, and the Speaker referred to it as containing a great deal of oriental and flowery language not suitable to our Western climate, and on another member protesting against making any comparison between Iraq and Ireland the Speaker remarked that "the honourable member must not take things too seriously."

## CHAPTER XII.

I WILL now leave General Maude established in Baghdad and return to my own experiences.

After my visit to the war zone towards the end of February 1917, we left Shaikh Sa'ad early one morning for Basra, and in the evening had a little adventure of our own. At about 7 P.M., when it was quite dark, and Grant and I were sitting in my cabin in the front of the ship awaiting dinner, we were startled by a terrific crash and everything was swept off the table, including the oil lamp. I shouted to Grant to look after the lamp, and made a dash for the door to see what had happened. As soon as I got outside I saw that the whole of Grant's cabin aft was ablaze. His oil stove for heating the cabin had turned over and set fire to the canvas sides. We then had an exciting ten minutes. My servant rushed in, and with great promptitude seized the burning stove and threw it overboard, whilst the crew came along bringing buckets of water. I went down to the engine-room to steady the men there and ordered the serang to make for the bank, as

I expected every moment the boat would sink beneath us.

After some time we got into the bank and several men jumped ashore with a rope, but the current was so strong they were unable to hold the boat until I jumped in and added my weight. Another man armed with a hammer and a long peg which he drove into the ground then slipped the rope over, thus making the boat fast. We then returned on board and found Grant had nearly extinguished the fire.

Actually what had happened was that a paddle-steamer towing two barges, one each side, was coming up the river and we had collided with a barge which caught our boat just amidships where the engines were, and had smashed in the whole of one side. It was a glancing blow, otherwise we should have been turned right over without the slightest chance of being saved. As it was, I was puzzled to know why we were not cut through below the water's edge and sunk.

The serang blamed the pilot, and the pilot blamed the other boat, which took not the slightest notice of the accident but continued on her way. Eventually, as there did not appear to be any leak, and the engines were in order, we again set off, and had just got under way when the fire again broke out, so we put into the bank.

At that moment a gunboat came along and signalled to us that we must not stay where we were as the Arabs were out, and all our throats

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

would be cut. We pushed off and eventually reached Amara, where we got some repairs done, and on Monday, the 26th February, arrived at Basra.

The following morning I was much interested in a curious procession which passed my house, consisting of a number of negresses and two or three old men. Two men were playing on harps, and a woman, neatly dressed in black, was carrying a green banner and leading by a string a sheep with a green ribbon round its neck. The whole party were singing very loudly. Later the party returned without the sheep, which apparently they had eaten. I tried to find out from my Arab servant the meaning of the festival, but he seemed as ignorant as myself on the subject.

At Basra I met Mr R. E. Holland (now Sir Robert Holland) and Mr John Wilson, who had been appointed Joint Trade Commissioners by the Government of India, to inquire into the prospects of British trade in Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf after the war. One of their references was in regard to the improvement of internal communication by rail, river, and road, and they asked me to accompany them on a tour up the Karun River and through Arabistan. General Maude had already requested me to make an inspection of the river route to Ahwaz, and Sir Percy Cox was also in favour of the tour, so it was agreed that we should leave at an early date.



I was particularly interested, because the Karun is described in the text-books as the only navigable river in Persia. Many years ago there had been great competition among the European nations for the privilege of navigating "this avenue of expeditious approach to the great cities and centres of corn cultivation in the West of Persia," to quote Lord Curzon's 'Persia.'

The concession was the subject of lengthy negotiation, and at one time the French were given the exclusive right of navigation, but in 1888, by a decree of the Shah, navigation between Mohammerah and Ahwaz was thrown open to the Mercantile Marine of all countries. This was considered a triumph for British diplomacy, and hopes were entertained of a large increase in the British trade with Persia, as a British company promptly started a service of river steamers on the Lower Karun, one of the vessels being the ancient *Shushan*.

My son who had been invalided for enteric in August was now stationed at the Black Watch Depot at Poona, and towards the end of February I had received a despondent telegram from him saying, "For God's sake get me back to Mespot." I saw General Maude, who very kindly arranged for him to join my staff as a temporary measure until he rejoined his regiment, and he arrived at Basra on 4th March just in time to accompany me on my tour in Arabistan.

In the morning of the 6th March we left Basra

in my small stern-wheeler, arriving at Mohammerah twenty miles below Basra in time for lunch with the manager of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, whose offices were in the town. They were greatly interested in the Karun-Ahwaz route, that being the principal line of communication between the oil refinery on the Shatt-el-Arab and the oil-fields. Unfortunately in the afternoon there was such a strong ebb current that we could make little headway, and we did not reach Bandar Nasiri, the steamer terminus just below Ahwaz, until the afternoon of the 8th March.

I cannot say I was greatly impressed with the only navigable river in Persia. The course of the river was exceedingly tortuous, in one length winding twenty-six miles to travel twelve, and the channel at times very narrow; in the flood season steamers drawing five feet of water can make the passage, but the current is so swift that upward progress is very slow, while in the low-water season the numerous sandbanks and shallow reaches limited the draught to about three feet.

At Bandar Nasiri were located the Custom House and British Vice-Consulate, and it was impossible to proceed farther by steamer as here began the rapids, formed of five separate lines of tertiary sandstone rock stretching across the river and extending from Bandar Nasiri to Ahwaz, a distance of 2000 yards.

Communication between Nasiri and Ahwaz is by means of a horse tramway, and from Ahwaz to near within eight miles of Shuster the river is again navigable by very shallow-draught vessels.

In the days long past, the whole of this country was richly cultivated, and the massive remains of a masonry dam built by the Sassanian kings can be seen standing out from the main line of reefs, and immediately above Ahwaz on the left bank are the head-works of the old canal and the dry bed of the canal itself.

At Ahwaz we halted and discussed our tour with General Younghusband, the G.O.C., Karun Force, and as Holland was pressed for time we decided to separate, he and Mr Wilson taking one route while I took another and rather longer one.

The Vice-Consul, Mr Noel, volunteered to accompany me as far as Shuster, and on the 10th March, at 7.30 A.M., we set off by motor car for Darukazineh, a rest-house of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, about fifteen miles below Shuster, where ponies were to meet us with an escort of Lur cavalry. It was a lovely spring day, the desert was carpeted with flowers, and we seemed a long way from scenes of war. We arrived at the rest-house at noon, mounted our ponies, and about two miles outside the town of Shuster we were met by the Assistant Political Officer (Captain Edmunds), and rode with him through the town to the Residency.

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

We had two of the escort in front and two behind, and as we went through the bazaar the whole of the populace were made by their headmen to stand up and bow low as we passed, while any unlucky creature who through obstinacy or carelessness did not rise was at once beaten by the sowars, to the intense amusement of the others. In the afternoon we inspected the town, the 10,000 inhabitants of which had the reputation for being the most fanatical in all Persia.

The town was quite one of the filthiest I have ever seen: the streets were only six feet wide, with the whole of the sewage flowing down the middle when there is rain, and collecting in heaps in dry weather. The houses were solidly built, and each house was provided with an underground chamber, lighted and ventilated by a vertical shaft, and with a flat roof about thirty feet from the ground. In the hot weather the family spent the day in the cellar and the night on the flat roof. The only outstanding building was the citadel, erected on an isolated sandstone cliff over one hundred feet high, overhanging the river.

The Residency was the one clean house in the town, and the Political Officer appeared to fill the duties of Town Magistrate, Sanitary Inspector, and Town Engineer. I asked him how he reconciled his administrative duties with his position as a neutral observer in a foreign country,

and he said the people had forced the work upon him and his slightest wish was obeyed. He had managed to get a certain amount of cleaning up done, and every morning held a court to settle disputes. The only thing he did not do was to collect taxes. It was a most gratifying sight to see this one solitary Englishman in his spotlessly clean house flying the Union Jack and held in such universal respect.

As we were gathered in the compound after our ride I witnessed what I had never seen before, a man savaged by a horse. There was a crowd of people watching us dismount, when suddenly a stallion, ridden by one of the escort, singled out a man in the crowd and bit him savagely in the shoulder, pulled him along, threw him down, and was about to kneel upon him when he was beaten off by the standers-by. I was told that the man had at one time ill-treated the horse, and he had never forgotten his persecutor.

The following morning we inspected the river and the marvellous hydraulic works, executed, it is said, 2000 years ago. As these works have been most graphically described in Lord Curzon's classic work 'Persia,' and suggestions made as to the order in which they were constructed, my account can be brief.

The River Karun rises in the mountains of the Bakhtiari country at a height of 13,000 feet above sea-level, and enters the plains of Arabistan

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

some twenty miles north of Shuster. About a quarter of a mile above the town the river divides into two streams, the Abi-Gargar to the east and the Abi-i-Shatait to the west, the two reuniting exactly twenty-eight miles below the town. The area between the two streams, measuring about 170 square miles, was at one time scientifically irrigated and richly cultivated.

The Gargar is for a considerable portion of its length an artificial canal, which flows through a gorge 100 feet deep, cut out of the solid sandstone rock, and where it leaves the Shatait are the remains of a barrage or weir built of hewn stone, and with six sluices for the passage of the water. Half a mile below this weir is a massive dam called the Pul-i-Bulaiti, which is built up to high-water level, and carries the road from Shuster to all places east. At each side of the dam are by-passes, and through these water is conveyed in tunnels to drive water-wheels for use in the flour mills below the dam.

On the occasion of my visit I counted thirty mills at work, and, although the water-wheels were extraordinarily primitive, they seemed to answer their purpose. The mills have been worked in this manner for probably two thousand years, and it has been estimated that, if modern turbines were installed, there would be sufficient power developed for use at the oil-fields and the lighting of the town by electricity, in addition to grinding the corn.

## VALERIAN'S BRIDGE

The Abi-Shatait was the Karun proper before the cutting of the Gargar, and immediately below the castle the Minau irrigation canal had its head-works, and, about 500 yards farther down, the river (which is nearly a quarter of a mile wide) is spanned by the world-famous structure known as Valerian's Bridge.

This great work, composed of a dam constructed of massive granite blocks with sluices for the passage of the water, is surmounted by a stone bridge of forty-one arches, 570 yards long; the whole forming a magnificent engineering conception. There is a legend that the bridge was built by Valerian, Emperor of Rome, when he was taken prisoner by the Sassanian king some 1800 years ago; but whoever the designer might be he was a great engineer. The records show that the dam was repaired in 1810 and again in 1840, but when I saw it there was a gap about 200 feet in breadth, while very deep holes had been scoured in the river-bed in its vicinity. The irrigation canals are now derelict, and the cultivation of the rich lands between the river has practically ceased.

I had now to change my plans and abandon the tour to Dizful and Shush, because Mr Soane, the Political Officer on whom I had relied to show me the rivers and canals in that neighbourhood, was suddenly transferred to Baghdad. Also there was a threatening of heavy rain,

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

which I was told might cause me to be held up for a week or more.

On Monday, the 12th March, the day after the fall of Baghdad, we began our ride back to Ahwaz, and as soon as we got out of the town we encountered a terrific gale from the south, accompanied by blinding clouds of dust, followed by sheets of rain, and we arrived at the rest-house Darukazineh soaked to the skin. We managed to get a fire and dry our clothes, and the following morning left by car for Ahwaz, where we stayed a couple of days, and then proceeded in my steamer for Mohammerah and Basra, arriving there on Sunday, the 18th March.

My tour in Arabistan had been of great interest, and I could see no reason why this fine province, which had once been richly cultivated, should not again by means of scientific irrigation and adequate communications contribute its share to the wealth and prosperity of the Persian Empire.

The principal rivers concerned are the Karun, Khakeh, and Diz, and in recent years several schemes have been under consideration. In 1904 an engineer deputed by the Government of India devoted a great deal of time to making detailed surveys of the country on both banks of the Karun River, and prepared a scheme for the construction of a dam across the river at Ahwaz and the irrigation of 250,000 acres of



land. In 1918-1920 the possibility of rebuilding the dam at Shuster and restoring the great canal system between the Rivers Abi-Gargar and Abi-Shatait and utilising the water-power for the construction of electricity was investigated and favourably reported upon. Nothing has, however, been accomplished, and the waters of rivers controlling an area of some 8000 square miles of potentially fertile country runs to waste in the Persian Gulf.

Irrigation and navigation seldom run hand in hand, and the use of the waters of the Karun for irrigation would ultimately preclude their use in the river for navigation purposes.

I gave the matter of communications in South-West Persia considerable attention, and, on the assumption that Mesopotamia would become a British possession and the bar at the mouth of the Shatt-el-Arab be dredged to permit of the passage of deep-draught vessels, I proposed to make Basra the principal port in the Persian Gulf, for Persia as well as Mesopotamia, and to abandon Mohammerah as a port. The scheme had great possibilities and obvious advantages. Wharves and warehouses would be built at Basra on the Persian side of the river, and, although not in Persian territory, the Persians would have a Custom House there and deal with Persian traffic; while steamers arriving at the port, after discharging their Basra and Baghdad cargo at the Basra wharves, would move to the

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

wharves on the Persian side of the river to discharge or take in their Persian cargo.

A railway would be constructed from Basra to Ahwaz, with a branch to Mohammerah, and from Ahwaz *via* Shuster to Dizful, and thence by road or rail to Ispahan and other towns in the interior. I visualised Basra a great world port dealing with the bulk of the imports and exports for Mesopotamia, Kermanshah *via* Baghdad, and Ispahan and Southern Persia *via* Ahwaz. With the removal of the Shatt-el-Arab bar steamers of great size would be able to go direct from any part of the world to the Basra wharves, and I anticipated a great addition to the trade with India and the Far East; as by the development of Mesopotamia the purchasing power of the people would be largely increased, and an expansion in the demands for all kinds of manufactured goods.

I believe my proposal, if accepted, would have proved to be in the best interests of Persia, and greatly assisted in the development of the country, but the breakdown of the Anglo-Persian Agreement of 1919 (one clause of which provided for British co-operation in the improvement of communications in Persia) and the creation of Irak as an independent State effectively put an end to any idea of Persia becoming a joint partner in the port of Basra.

There had already been a dispute of many years' standing between Turkey and Persia as

to their jurisdiction on the Shatt-el-Arab River, and, subject to the right of Persia at Mohammerah and at the anchorage off the town, a commission had decided that the whole of the main stream of the Shatt-el-Arab should be included in the territory of Turkey.

Railway construction in Persia had been discussed and attempts made to obtain concessions for the last fifty years, but it was left to the present Shah to decide finally on the building of a through railway from the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf, a distance of 1500 kilometres, at an estimated cost of some thirty million pounds. The terminus at the Persian Gulf end was dependent on the selection of a suitable port, and Mohammerah was strongly recommended by the experts consulted, but the fact of its being on the Shatt-el-Arab River and in proximity to the Iraq frontier was sufficient to damn it utterly in the eyes of the Shah and his advisers. A port is, therefore, being built up the Khor Musa, a deep arm of the sea, thirty miles west of the mouth of the Shatt-el-Arab. The expense will be prodigious, and from what I know of the locality I doubt the possibility of making a satisfactory commercial port. For one reason, shipowners prefer established trade routes, and even the Shah cannot insist on them sending their vessels thirty miles up a mud creek where there is no town or other amenities and a most horrible climate.

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

I do not think Mohammerah could be made into a first-class port, whereas at Basra there is an established well-equipped port at which steamers of any size could be accommodated and be sure of that essential to the shipowner, 'quick despatch.'

So far as the Persian Gulf end is concerned I think the railway will be a failure from the commercial point of view, but in these days commonsense has to give way to racial feelings and intense nationalism.

## CHAPTER XIII.

ON the 1st January 1917 I was promoted to the rank of Brigadier-General, and, on the same day, on calling at the office of the Inspector-General of Communications, I was informed that a telegram had been received from the War Office, repeated to the Commander-in-Chief, India, to the effect that two Directorates in Mesopotamia connected with Water Transport were unnecessary, and that mine was to be absorbed into the Inland Water Transport Directorate, which had been created by the War Office itself when the administration of the Mesopotamian Force was handed over to them.

On the face of it, there seemed no reason for making such a drastic change, but strange things were done in the war which would have been impossible in time of peace, and, apparently, the view of the War Office was that, as they had an Inland Water Transport Department managing the canals in France, there was no valid reason why Inland Water Transport should

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

not also control the Rivers Shatt-el-Arab, Tigris and Euphrates, and the Port of Basra.

The change was not advised or desired by either General Maude or the Government of India, and was not allowed to pass without the strongest protests. Ultimately, the War Office agreed to a compromise whereby my department should retain control of the ocean port and port personnel, port and river engineering works within the ocean port, and such special engineering work as might from time to time be ordered ; but the whole of my now perfectly organised Port Traffic Department and all the river work on the Tigris and Euphrates were to be transferred to Inland Water Transport.

In the circumstances I did not feel disposed to remain with the Force, and I telegraphed to the Government of India saying that as I had been appointed by them, and was unaware that I had forfeited their confidence, I hoped I should receive orders from the Government of India direct, as it seemed very doubtful whether on War Office conditions there would be sufficient work at Basra for a whole-time officer of my standing. In reply I received the following telegram, dated 6th February 1917 :—

“ Control of operations in Mesopotamia, being in hands of War Office, Government of India are unable to interfere with delimitation of duties ordered by them. Government of India, however, consider it to be in public interests that

## WAR OFFICE MAKES CHANGES

you should continue to perform the duties assigned to you under the new organisation, and that Army Commander should continue to have at his disposal your expert knowledge and wide experience. They do not doubt that in these circumstances you will accept wholeheartedly the War Office decision."

I replied that I was desirous of doing what was best in the public interest, and accepted without reservation the new arrangements. On the 8th February I received a letter from General Maude, in which, after congratulating me on my promotion to the rank of Brigadier-General, he observed :—

"As you will realise, the change in affairs has in no way been initiated by me, but emanated direct from the War Office, and the orders were so peremptory that it was not much use combating them, although at the instance of the I.G.C. I recommended certain modifications, some of which they accepted. I am delighted to think that we shall not lose your valuable services in consequence of this alteration, for no one knows better than I do what a difference it has made to us having your expert knowledge here."

I was very sorry to part control with the Port Traffic Department, which, after much strenuous work, had with the loyal co-operation of Colonel Browne and others of the staff been forged into a perfect machine ; but in February of the following year it was separated from

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

Inland Water Transport and placed under a Port Director immediately responsible to the Inspector-General of Communications.

During my service in Mesopotamia I had accumulated an immense amount of data and information regarding the conservancy of the rivers and future of the Port of Basra, apart from the immediate necessities for the purpose of the war ; and Sir Percy Cox, the Chief Political Officer and future High Commissioner, had added his protest to others, and said he must have a competent adviser and referee in regard to problems affecting the rivers and the future interests of the country in respect of them, and especially someone independent of Inland Water Transport, who were only concerned with pushing ships up the river.

I therefore decided to carry on in the new capacity until the works immediately in hand were completed, and then to ask for three months' leave to India, in order to put in writing my views on the various engineering and port problems which would have to be considered at the end of the war, when, presumably, Mesopotamia would come permanently under British control.

My departure from Mesopotamia came, however, sooner than I expected. All my survey boats and launches were commandeered for military purposes on the 11th March and work suspended indefinitely. The work of my depart-



ment was then so limited that I suggested to General MacMunn (the Inspector-General of Communications) that the time was opportune for me to take three months' leave in India and occupy my time in making my post-war reports. He thought the suggestion a good one, and offered to lend me one of my own commandeered steamers to go to Baghdad, as I wished to inspect the river up to that point and also see General Maude about my leave.

Accompanied by my son and Sergeant Dirks, my soldier clerk, we sailed on the 27th March, and arrived at Sannaiyat on the 31st, where we landed; and after inspecting the old Turkish and British trenches proceeded to Kut, which we found completely desolate and practically razed to the ground, as there was not a single house intact.

On the 3rd of April we reached Ctesiphon and went ashore to see the site of the great battle and look at the wonderful vaulted hall which is all that remains of the palace built by Chosroe in 550 A.D. It is a splendid example of Sassanian architecture. The great hall was 83 feet wide and 95 feet high to crown of arch. The springing of the vault is 40 feet from the ground, but up to about 26 feet above the springing the walls are built in horizontal curves projecting inwards as they rise, so that the actual width on the vaulted portion has been diminished by one-sixth and measures about 71 feet. The crown of the

vault is 9 feet thick, the walls at the base being 23 feet thick. The material is burnt brick, and the arch was probably built without centering.

Opposite Ctesiphon is a vast mound burying what was once the town of Seleucia, founded by Seleucus Nicator, ruler of Babylon from 312 B.C. It was built with the object of exhausting Babylon, and in the time of Pliny was said to have 600,000 inhabitants. It was burned by the Romans with 300,000 inhabitants in the year 164 B.C., and its destruction was the end of Hellenism in Babylonia.

From Ctesiphon we proceeded to the Diyala River where there was such desperate fighting at the crossing and a very heavy casualty list. We were just leaving the Diyala when a steamer with General Sir George Kirkpatrick, the Chief of the General Staff in India, came alongside and I went over and had a long talk. He expressed his entire approval of the proposal that I should go to India for several months, but said I need not quote him as an authority.

General Kirkpatrick then went down-stream in his steamer, and we pushed on to Hinaidi port where we tied up for the night, and at 5 A.M. on Wednesday, the 4th April, we proceeded to Baghdad. I was looking forward keenly to seeing the town which after so much desperate fighting and loss of life and treasure had been at last captured by our victorious troops, and by ten o'clock we were tied up just above the British Residency.

The Tigris at Baghdad is a magnificent broad and deep stream, and the town seen from the river with its palm trees and orange groves, its blue and gold domes and minarets, and a number of good-looking houses on the river bank—of which the finest was the British Residency—presented a most attractive spectacle, which was instantly dispelled when we walked ashore and saw the narrow, filthy streets and the dilapidated houses of mud-brown bricks. There was one broad thoroughfare designed by Khalil Pasha during his term of office, but this was fringed by partially destroyed houses, and the street itself was a mass of débris. It was only a month since the occupation, but complete order had been restored, a Military Governor appointed, police patrols at work, and accommodation found for all the officers of the Headquarter Staff and their various messes ; while the troops were, as is usual when we occupy a town, fully engrossed in cleaning up.

The climate was a delightful change after Basra, and although the hot weather was approaching the atmosphere was so dry that in the middle of the day one felt no discomfort.

I found a number of my old friends installed in comfortable quarters, and on the night of our arrival we dined with General Rimington in his mess, and the following morning breakfasted in the Political mess with Sir Percy Cox, who was greatly interested in my proposal to make Basra the chief port for Persia, and said he had

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

seen the Army Commander and strongly urged that I should be allowed to go to India to write my reports.

Later in the day I had my interview with General Maude, who was not at all enthusiastic, and said that, in his opinion, any writing of reports about what was to happen after the war, or any work except that in connection with the immediate prosecution of the war, was unnecessary and superfluous.

I reminded him that the home Government had already sent out a Trade Commission with a view to the development of the country after the war, and that under existing conditions I was at present insufficiently employed, to which he replied that the War Office, who were many thousands of miles away, had passed certain orders without in any way consulting him in the matter. Finally, he said it was not a matter he could deal with, and he would telegraph to the Government of India for instructions.

In the evening I dined with Sir Percy Cox and the following evening with General Maude, who went out of his way to be most agreeable. On Saturday, the 7th April, I called on Sir Percy Cox to say good-bye to him, and he told me that he had seen the Army Commander, who had practically agreed to our proposal, and that he (Sir Percy Cox) had telegraphed to India that in the event of the Military Department not wishing to retain my services, to write

## DEPARTURE FOR BOMBAY

the records of my work ; the Political Department were exceedingly anxious to do so. I left for Basra at 12 noon, arriving there at 4 P.M. on the 11th April.

On the 29th April I received a telegram saying the Army Commander had granted me three months' leave to proceed to India to write my reports. My last act was to veto a proposal that the large dredgers—*Oswald*, *Campbell*, and *Lees*—should be used as tugs to tow barges about the river. On the 3rd May I sailed for Bombay, accompanied by my faithful soldier clerk, in the *Egra* with 1300 troops on board and seven generals.

As my son was still on my staff, I asked him if he would like to come with me to Simla and see his mother, but he indignantly refused. I then suggested he might care for a job on the lines of communication, but this increased his wrath, and he said he had only joined my staff as a means of getting back to his regiment. I accordingly signed what might have been his death warrant and he rejoined his regiment at the front and was in all the fighting above Baghdad and subsequently in Palestine.

The voyage to Bombay was uneventful. At Henjan we were joined by the steamers *Arona* and *Khosro* conveying Turkish prisoners and the *Jedda* and *Edavana* with troops, and we formed a convoy with H.M.S. *Euryalus*, first-class cruiser, as escort.

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

On Sunday, the 6th May, the Captain of the ship conducted Church service. All the officers and a large number of the troops attended, and we listened spellbound to the earnest little skipper, who preached the best sermon I have ever heard.

One evening we were rather amused by what we called convoy amenities.

Cruiser signalling to *Egra*    "I cannot see your port head-light."

*Egra* to Cruiser    .    .    "Think you must be blind."

Cruiser to *Jedda*    .    .    "I told you to darken ship."

*Egra* to Cruiser    .    .    "If you are under the delusion  
that you have darkened ship  
I think it is only right to tell  
you that you are showing  
more lights than the *Jedda*."

Cruiser to *Egra*    .    .    "Thank you."

We arrived at Bombay on Sunday, the 13th May, and although still an officer in the Mesopotamia Expeditionary Force, my term of active service came to an end. After staying a few days in Bombay I took the train to Simla, arriving there on the 17th May.

## CHAPTER XIV.

ALTHOUGH a side-show, with no possibility of affecting the main issue which was being fought out in France, the scandals in Mesopotamia gradually penetrated the veil hiding them, and public opinion at home became greatly moved on learning of the sufferings of the wounded and the repeated lack of success attending our arms. Letters appeared in the Press and many questions were asked in the Houses of Parliament.

On Friday, the 14th July 1916, the 'Times' had a leading article entitled "Responsibilities in Mesopotamia," in which they pointed out that the lines of inquiry were twofold: the first and greatest, because the most serious, being the degree to which the home Government participated and possibly even urged the decision to advance to Baghdad; and the second, the errors of judgment of the General on the spot and of the Army Department in India. They pointed out that no civilians were responsible for the utter breakdown of the transport, the failure to foresee the exclusive need of shallow-draught steamers, the neglect to consider the question of light

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

railways, and for the recklessness which urged a long advance regardless of the transport difficulties and the appalling collapse of the medical arrangements. The 'Times' added that there was a tendency to attack the Indian Finance Department and to make a scapegoat of Sir William Meyer, the Indian Finance Minister ; but as a matter of fact there was not the slightest need for the Finance Department to be economical in Mesopotamia, because Great Britain was meeting all the charges.

On the following day, 15th July, the 'Times' returned to the attack and said they made no apology for returning to the subject as the letters which they continued to receive bore witness to the intense feeling which the mis-managed campaign had aroused in the public to get wrongs righted. It was impossible to determine responsibility for past errors, because a faulty system was still at work and some of the authors of grievous blunders still remained in authority. They complained that news was being withheld, and asked why the report of the Commission sent to the Tigris to inquire into the breakdown of the medical arrangements had not been published. The article concluded by saying : " Many other matters require explanation. For instance, a distinguished authority on port administration, Sir George Buchanan, was sent from Rangoon to improve the wharfage accommodation for transports at



Basra. He was so obstructed by General Lake that he had to return to India and invite the aid of the Viceroy."

Towards the end of August General Sir Percy Lake asked me to see him and showed me the article, which I read with great surprise, and realised that the name Sir Percy Lake had been used instead of that of Sir John Nixon. The relations between Sir Percy Lake and myself had always been most cordial, and he asked me to write him a letter to that effect as he considered the article in the 'Times' damaging to his reputation. I was rather surprised at the Army Commander considering the matter of any importance, but as he wished it I wrote a long letter pointing out the untruth of the statement as regarded himself, and detailing the circumstance which had possibly led to the mistake being made. To my letter Sir Percy Lake replied in the following terms :—

"Thank you very much for your letter which so fully and courteously disposes of the statement in the 'Times' that I had obstructed your work. I quite appreciate your reason for wishing to explain what the position was under my predecessor. I have expressed very high appreciation of the value of your work to the Force, in a despatch which is now being prepared. But I should like to take this opportunity of thanking you for that work and for the assistance and expert advice which you have always placed at my service. I have felt strongly that the

failure in Bombay to see that your requirements were properly attended to in the early part of this year has been responsible for accentuating many of our difficulties."

Speaking in the House of Commons on the 18th July with reference to the Mesopotamian campaign, the Prime Minister (Mr Asquith) said :—

"Although you may accumulate stores of supplies at the base, they are of comparatively little use unless they are sent to the front and made available for the persons actually engaged in the fighting campaign. There again we have had two inquiries into the matter; the first by Sir George Buchanan, who is an expert on matters of river navigation and was despatched early in the year by the Government of India, and, I think, twice has been there and has exhaustively reviewed the geographical conditions from the point of view of river transport; and the other by General Gillman, a distinguished staff officer who was sent by the War Office here in March, and examined not only the question of the rivers, but of the railway transport and of the facilities for it, and the means of accelerating its completion. The Government—I will not say they are satisfied, for they are not—but the Government are quite convinced in consequence of these careful examinations from these different points of view on the spot that the imperfections of transport are being largely remedied and will soon, so far as the local circumstances permit, completely disappear. It is only fair to remember in that

connection that transport seems to me, if I may use the expression, the weak point, at any rate the pivot of all those various troubles that have taken place. It is only fair to remember that when this expedition was first sent it consisted of two divisions. In consequence of what took place during the earlier months, the expedition was brilliantly successful. I do not believe that there ever has been any military expedition which was more skilfully and ably conducted than this expedition was in its earlier stages. But in consequence of the reverse which subsequently occurred and interrupted the success and particularly the beleaguering of General Townshend at Kut, the expedition which originally consisted of two divisions was increased to seven divisions, and the urgency of relieving General Townshend was such that it was thought right—I am not sure it was at all an imprudent act—to push on the troops ahead of the transport in the hope that the relief might be speedily or at anyrate timely effected; I believe it will be found if the House examines the substance of the complaints of deficiencies connected with the transport that they are due to the fact that promptitude and rapidity of action and an enormous increase in the numbers of men was thought necessary for the immediate purpose.”

The speech when read by us in Mesopotamia seemed such a travesty of the facts that it was difficult to know whether to be amused or annoyed, while the suggestion that the troops should move ahead of their transport showed

how little Mr Asquith had been informed of actual events.

The 'Times' published another leading article on 19th July, and said—

“ At this moment the public are chiefly anxious about Mesopotamia, where a very considerable number of troops remain in one of the worst climates in the world, under conditions which are believed to be still far from satisfactory. All our blunders and misfortunes in Mesopotamia flowed from the decision to advance from Kut to Baghdad, and we must get back to that point if we are to prevent their recurrence and retrieve their effects. The motive of the Government was in short political and not military. Mr Asquith says that the Government were supported by the ‘consentient advice of all their military authorities.’ If that is the case the names of these remarkable military experts should be well known. They were apparently urging the Government to undertake one of the wildest adventures in the annals of war. General Townshend is believed to have been in command of 11,000 men and 28 guns. He was ordered to capture an open and populous city, difficult to hold and defend, to which all supplies had to be carried by a river route 573 miles in length. His line of communication was very weakly held, the river was so shallow that at some seasons it could not be navigated by vessels drawing more than  $3\frac{1}{2}$  feet draught, and for eighty miles its channel was so tortuous and narrow that vessels could only pass each other if one tied up. The intervening country was swamp and desert. A whole legion of

## THE SPECIAL COMMISSION

‘military authorities’ could not justify a Government of commonsense men in such an enterprise with four unsuspected Turkish divisions lurking at the end of it.”

The Government of India had been aware for some time that all was not well in Mesopotamia, and in March 1916 they appointed a Commission consisting of an eminent civilian, Sir William Vincent, and an equally eminent soldier, Major General Bingley, now Lieut.-General Sir Alfred Bingley, K.C.I.E., to report on the arrangements made for the collective treatment and removal of the sick and wounded, also to ascertain and assign responsibility for any defects found.

The Commission spent several weeks in Mesopotamia, and their report, dated 29th June 1916, was an exceedingly able and outspoken document. It was addressed to the Secretary to the Government of India in the Army Department, but was not made public until a year after it had been written, and then only as an annex to the report of the Mesopotamia Commission.

Meanwhile public opinion had been so thoroughly roused that Mr Asquith’s Government in August 1916 passed the Special Commission (Dardanelles and Mesopotamia) Act, 1916, and twelve persons were appointed Commissioners for the purpose of inquiring into the origin, inception, and conduct of operations of war in Mesopotamia, including the supply of drafts,

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

reinforcements, ammunition, and equipment to the troops and fleet, the provision for the sick and wounded, and the responsibility of those departments of Government whose duty it had been to minister to the wants of the forces employed in that theatre of war.

The Commission was a strong one, and included a former Secretary of State for India (Lord George Hamilton), four members of Parliament, an Admiral, a General, and the Chairman of Committees of the House of Lords.

The defect of the Commission was that no member had any practical experience of military or civil administration in India, and although they took evidence on oath the usual rules of evidence were not observed. The Commission decided that they would not be justified in incurring the great delay and expense involved in paying a visit to India and Mesopotamia, which was an unfortunate decision, as in no other way could they have obtained first-hand knowledge of the facts and been able to appreciate the difficulties of the campaign; and although they held sixty meetings and examined over one hundred witnesses in England, they were unable to obtain direct evidence from the Quartermaster-Generals and other departments of the Government of India responsible for the administration of the forces in Mesopotamia.

The report of the Commission, which consisted of 120 pages of a Blue Book, was presented on

## THE MAIN ISSUES

the 17th May 1917 and published in June 1917, and it was signed by all the members with the exception of Commander Josiah Wedgwood, who wrote a separate report.

The main issues were—

- (1) Who was responsible for the advance to Baghdad with inadequate forces and equipment ?
- (2) Who was responsible for the lack of river transport and the inefficiency of the base at Basra ?
- (3) What was the cause of the medical breakdown ?

The following is a summary of the Commission's Findings and Conclusions on these questions :—

### THE ADVANCE ON BAGHDAD.

“ The advance to Baghdad under the conditions existing in October 1915 was an offensive movement based upon political and military miscalculations and attempted with tired and insufficient forces and inadequate preparation. It resulted in the surrender of more than a division of our finest fighting troops, and the casualties incurred in the ineffective attempts to relieve Kut amounted to some 23,000 men. The loss of prestige associated with these military failures was less than might have been antici-

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pated, owing to the deep impression made throughout and beyond the localities where the combats occurred by the splendid fighting power of the British and Indian forces engaged.

Various authorities and high officials are connected with the sanction given to this untoward advance. Each and all, in our judgment, according to their relative and respective positions, must be made responsible for the errors in judgment, to which they were parties, and which formed the basis of their advice or orders.

The weightiest share of responsibility lies with Sir John Nixon, whose confident optimism was the main cause of the decision to advance. The other persons responsible were: in India, the Viceroy (Lord Hardinge) and the Commander-in-Chief (Sir Beauchamp Duff); in England, the Military Secretary of the India Office (Sir Edmund Barrow), the Secretary of State for India (Mr Austen Chamberlain), and the War Committee of the Cabinet. We put these names in the order and sequence of responsibility. The expert advisers of the Government, who were consulted, also approved the advance, and are responsible for their advice; but the papers submitted to us suggest that the approval of the naval and military experts was reluctant, and was perhaps partly induced by a natural desire not to disappoint the hopes of advantage to the general situation which the Government entertained. It is, however, notable that the



## FINDINGS OF COMMISSION

experts unanimously anticipated no difficulty in the advance on Baghdad, but only in holding it.

### TRANSPORT.

In January 1916 the Government of India sent Sir George Buchanan, a civilian who had been in charge of the Port of Rangoon, with a view to his becoming Director-General of the Port of Basra, and reorganising the traffic and facilities of the port. He did not receive any formal or definite appointment indicating the position he was to hold or specifying his duty, though a titular designation was given to him—viz., that of Director-General of Port Administration and River Conservancy. It was, unfortunately, left to Sir John Nixon to arrange with Sir George Buchanan, after his arrival, exactly what the duties of the position were to be. Differences naturally ensued. Sir George Buchanan's powers were so limited by Sir John Nixon that the former considered his services were not put to their proper use. After a short stay he returned to India. Meanwhile, his report on the conditions as he found them on arrival at Basra was communicated to Simla. In this he makes the following observations:—

‘I found it difficult to realise that we had been in occupation of Basra for a year, as the arrangements for the landing and storing of

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goods and stores of every description were of the most primitive order, and, in the absence of roads, the whole area was a huge quagmire. To a newcomer appearances were such that troops and stores might have been landed, for the first time, the previous week. . . . The military expedition to Basra is, I believe, unique, inasmuch as in no previous case has such an enormous force been landed and maintained without an adequately prepared base.'

About the middle of 1916 Sir George Buchanan returned to Basra, the port and traffic management was radically reorganised and Sir George Buchanan was placed in full control. Since that time, and since the War Office took over the charge and responsibility of the expedition, energy has been shown in building wharves, increasing the facilities, and generally making the port more capable of meeting the growing demands upon it.

(a) From the first the paramount importance, both of river and railway transport in Mesopotamia, was insufficiently realised by the military authorities in India.

(b) A deficiency of river transport existed from the time the army left tidal water and advanced up-river from Qurna. This deficiency became very serious as the lines of communication lengthened and the numbers of the force increased.

## SIR JOHN NIXON'S RESPONSIBILITY

(c) Up to the end of 1915 the efforts made to rectify the deficiency of river transport were wholly inadequate.

(d) For want of comprehensive grasp of the transport situation and insufficiency of river steamers we find the military authorities in India are responsible. The responsibility is a grave one.

(e) River hospital steamers were an urgent requirement for the proper equipment of the expedition, and were not ordered until much too late.

(f) With General Sir John Nixon rests the responsibility for recommending the advances in 1915 with insufficient transport and equipment. The evidence did not disclose an imperative need to advance without due preparation. For what ensued from shortage of steamers, General Sir John Nixon must, in such circumstances, be held to blame.

(g) During the first four months of 1916, the shortage of transport was fatal to the operations undertaken for the relief of Kut. Large reinforcements could not be moved to the front in time to take part in critical battles.

(h) Facilities for the discharge and handling of cargo at Basra, also provision of works for the erection and repair of river craft, were hopelessly inadequate.

(j) Proceedings in connection with the filling of orders for river craft by the Director of the

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

Royal Indian Marine in India and the India Office in London were far from satisfactory.

(*k*) Looking at the facts, which from the first must have been apparent to any administrator, military or civilian, who gave a few minutes' consideration to the map and to the conditions in Mesopotamia, the want of foresight and provision for the most fundamental needs of the expedition reflects discredit upon the organising aptitude of all the authorities concerned.

### MEDICAL PROVISION.

As regards the treatment of the sick and the wounded, our conclusions are more lengthy and minute, as this part of our inquiry necessitates close examination into details.

We find that—

(1) The medical provision for the Mesopotamian Campaign was from the beginning insufficient ; by reason of the continuance of this insufficiency there was a lamentable breakdown in the care of the sick and wounded after the battle of Ctesiphon, and after the battles in January 1916 ; there was amelioration in March and April 1916 ; but that since then the improvement has been continual until it is reasonable to hope that now the medical provision is satisfactory.

## MEDICAL DEFICIENCIES

(2) The defects of medical provision caused avoidable suffering to the sick and wounded, and during the breakdown in the winter of 1915-16 this suffering was most lamentably severe.

(3) The deficiencies, which were the main causes of the avoidable suffering of the sick and wounded, were in the provision of the following :—

- (a) River hospital steamers.
- (b) Medical personnel.
- (c) River transport.
- (d) Ambulance land transport.

They also found that there had been grave misuse of official reticence as to medical defects and the sufferings of the sick and wounded, while in his separate report Commander Wedgwood remarks—

‘ We had evidence that the use of the censorship in Mesopotamia did much to injure the morale of the troops. For some time after the medical breakdown no letters home were permitted except on the printed postcards, of which there were few or none available at the front. It seems clear to me that the censorship was used to prevent people at home from knowing what the troops were suffering. This is not the proper use of the censorship, and is a point that should be made clear now to all the various

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General Officers Commanding Expeditionary Forces.' ”

Long before the report was published and laid on the table of the House of Commons on the 14th June, Baghdad had been captured and the evils inquired into fully remedied ; indeed, to discuss the matter now seemed almost like flogging a dead horse. But so great was the indignation at the horrors revealed in connection with the treatment of the wounded, that a storm of passionate indignation was aroused in the United Kingdom along with a demand for the punishment of those whose conduct had been impugned.

A three-day debate in the House of Commons on the 12th to 14th July 1917 brought out all points of view. The debate was opened by the Attorney-General (Sir F. E. Smith, later Lord Birkenhead) in a very long speech. He said that “ throughout the whole of the Mesopotamian Campaign, culminating in the Battle of Ctesiphon in November 1915, strange and even terrible rumours became aroused in this country as to the sufferings of the wounded and the insufficiency of medical and other provisions. Those rumours produced great alarm, anxiety, and indignation in the country and this House. Side by side with those there grew up a volume of criticism against the whole conception and conduct of the campaign. As letters from Mesopotamia

multiplied the indignation grew constantly, both in the House and out of it, more articulate, and it became obvious that neither the House of Commons nor the country would tolerate any delay in investigating the complaints that had been made."

After describing the formation of the Commission and the procedure adopted by the Commissioners, Sir F. E. Smith pointed out the extreme difficulty in proceeding against any of the officers named in the report. He reminded the House that the Commission was not a judicial inquiry, that the officers charged were not represented by Counsel, and that the laws of evidence were not observed, and he asked whether a grave punishment could be inflicted upon a man whose evidence had been taken in the manner described by him. A great part of the Press of the country had insisted—since the findings of the Commission—that Parliament and the Government should act as though there had been a charge and proved charges, and the fact that there were no charges had not prevented verdicts of "guilty."

With reference to General Sir John Nixon he observed: "I say nothing of many of the charges brought against him, for, after all, he was an undaunted soldier, grown grey in arms in the service of his country, one of whose faults was impetuosity in the face of the enemy in the darkest days of the war. Is there really

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any one bold enough to say that you should tear the uniform off General Nixon's back on the strength of evidence taken in his absence, and which he never enjoyed the right of refuting."

Sir F. E. Smith finally suggested that alternative methods of dealing with the matter were by a Court of Inquiry under the provisions of the Army (Courts of Inquiry Act, 1916), which would only apply to military officers, or by a tribunal set up by Statute which would deal with the acts of both soldiers and civilians.

The House of Commons on the first day of the debate appeared to approve of such a course, whereupon Mr Austen Chamberlain, the Secretary of State for India, in the following words resigned his office—

"That decision," said Mr Austen Chamberlain, "I do not for one moment dispute. It necessarily, however, carries with it another decision for me. It is not possible that I, who am named in the Report, apart from my colleagues in matters in which I acted in common with them, and whose responsibility is sole and undivided in other matters where the Commission administers rebuke or censure, should continue as the head of that office in which my conduct has been censured, while such conduct might at any moment be called in question by the judicial tribunal to which you are going to refer these



matters. Accordingly . . . my final resignation is in the hands of the Prime Minister."

In the course of the debate which followed, and in which a number of members took part—the India Office, the Government of India, the Viceroy, the Commander-in-Chief (General Sir John Nixon)—the policy of the Mesopotamian Campaign and the Report of the Commission itself were alternatively violently attacked and warmly defended. There was one exception: no one defended the medical services or the particular medical officers named by the Commission.

Possibly the most curious speech was made by Sir J. D. Rees, who, speaking on the transport difficulties, said :—

"There are officers whom I hold to be most unjustly attacked. Perhaps I should not say unjustly attacked, but I refer to the conclusion of the Report as regards, I think, the means of transport in relation to Sir John Nixon. Sir John Nixon had no sooner taken charge of the expedition than he demanded three paddle-steamers, three stern-wheelers, eight tugs, forty-three barges, and insisted upon the necessity for this amount of transport. His Chief of Staff forwarded a full memorandum to headquarters, in which he said: 'In this crisis insufficient river transport may lead to a breakdown and

more than serious consequences.' He did not get these things.

"On another occasion he appealed again for help. What is a gallant officer to do who has represented his requirements, and says, 'I want these men, these steamers, these barges,' and he does not get them? I believe that nine officers out of ten would then say, 'I have made my application, I have stated my case, I have not received the help to which I was entitled, I will go on as I am.' I am sure Lord Clive used to do that, and other Generals in India. . . . The shortage of river transport was the cause; everybody knows it, and so says the Commission of the failure to relieve Kut. The shortage of river transport was not due to General Nixon, who applied for it. He did not get it up in time to allow for an advance on Kut.

"The Government of India was blamed for many sins of omission or commission, but surely should not be held responsible for the chaotic state of the base, the lack of means for carrying out the ordinary repairs to a river fleet, or for the delay in England in complying with an order for steamers, tugs, and barges. The fact remains that Sir John Nixon was not obliged to advance beyond or even so far as Kut until he had sufficient transport. But he took the risk, and whether it was a justifiable risk and one that would have been taken by Lord Clive or Lord Kitchener is a matter of opinion."

Mr Balfour (the late Lord Balfour) said :—

“ I must frankly admit that I am in many respects very little moved by the report of the Commission. Nothing can exceed the feelings of horror with which everybody must read of the tragic events which followed the retirement of the British Force, but the general character and the manner in which the Commission have approached this question is not the proper method of dealing with these great State questions. Anybody who listened, as I am sure most honourable members of the House did, to the speech of my Right Honourable friend, the Secretary of State for India, must have felt that the Commission—after that speech—is quite as much on its trial as any of the gentlemen whom it has arraigned.”

After Mr Balfour's speech, Sir A. Williamson, who was one of the Commissioners, stoutly defended the Commission, and was strongly supported by Mr Ramsay Macdonald. Mr M'Neill was the only member who pointed out that—

“ If the advance to Baghdad was defensible on general grounds—and I think perhaps it was on military grounds—it surely ought to have been conditioned by the question whether or not there was sufficient transport and supplies to make it not only possible but a moderately safe operation. If the persons responsible with

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complete knowledge at their disposal thought there was likelihood of a serious lack of transport, then that should have entered into their calculations; and if, in spite of that, they insisted upon going on with the larger military operations, they ought to be held responsible."

At the close of the debate no decision had been arrived at as to the setting up of the Judicial Tribunal. But so far as military officers were concerned, the Army Council called upon those concerned to explain in writing the statements of the Commissioners.

To close the chapter, General Sir John Nixon was exonerated, decorated with the G.C.M.G. in 1919, and died in December 1921.

The official history of the war in Mesopotamia, dated 1927, has the following comment on the Mesopotamia Commission Report—

"The Report apportioned blame, in different degrees of responsibility, to the Home and Indian Governments, the Secretary of State for India, the Viceroy, and several military officers, including Generals Duff, Barrow, and Nixon. In the light of the fuller evidence available since then, it is now generally admitted that the Commission's apportionment of blame was not altogether justified, more especially perhaps as regards the authorities in India and in its failure to give full recognition to the way in which they were handicapped, largely owing to the

assistance which India rendered to the Empire immediately after the outbreak of war.

In criticising its unpreparedness in 1914, judged by European standards, the Commission appear to have overlooked the constitutional limitations of the Army in India to the defence of India's frontiers and to the maintenance of internal order. For the first time in her history India, on the insistence of her Viceroy and people, was invited to bear her share of a world war against the greatest military power in Europe; and, as already related, besides other assistance, she sent many troops to Europe, Egypt, Africa, Mesopotamia, and Aden. The strain on her resources was very great, but, in spite of her military limitations, she was able at the outbreak of war to make good several deficiencies in the armament and equipment of the home forces.

The preparations of European armies for a war on which they had been concentrating their attention for many years proved inadequate in many ways. It is not surprising, therefore, that India—to whom the problem was new—forced to improvise at the eleventh hour with reduced or insufficient resources, should have been found lacking in some respects."

By far the most severe criticisms on the campaign are made by Mr Lloyd George in the second volume of his 'War Memoirs,' published

in 1933. He begins by quoting a minute from the War Council held on 24th February 1915 showing that he opposed the introduction of the campaign on the grounds that it was merely a side issue, and he gives the following reasons for "incorporating a chapter on the Mesopotamian scandal" in his reminiscences of the war:—

"It is a perfect example of what military administration is capable of if entirely freed from civilian 'interference.' It was an ideal professional soldiers' campaign, lacking even a minimum of supervision from the meddlesome politician. Tradition places the Garden of Eden in the land between the Euphrates and the Tigris. In this blissful enclosure there reappeared in 1916 the Paradise of the Brass Hat. He reigned alone in unfettered and unrestricted sway over this garden for nearly two years. There was no serpent or consort to mislead or meddle with him. Where there were any politicians roaming about they were as meek as any beast in the ancient Garden. He ran his Eden alone. Let us see what kind of a Paradise he produced.

"It is a gruesome story of tragedy and suffering resulting from incompetence and slovenly carelessness on the part of the responsible military authorities. Attempts had been made to smother up the story through a campaign of secrecy and

deliberate misrepresentation, but despite these efforts enough had leaked out early in 1916 to make it clear that strong action on the part of the Home Government was demanded."

And writing of the Mesopotamia Commission, he says—

"The facts revealed by this Commission's report cast a baleful light upon the mismanagement, stupidity, criminal neglect, and amazing incompetence of the military authorities who were responsible for the organisation of the expedition, and on the horrible and unnecessary suffering of the gallant men who were sent to failure and defeat through the blunders of those in charge."

On the subject of river transport Mr Lloyd George sums up what was common knowledge at the time—

"The lack of river transport up to the spring of 1916 was a direct cause of the failure of military operations carried out by the troops with the utmost bravery. On account of the shortage it took nearly two months to concentrate troops and supplies for the advance from Amara to Kut, and the advance to Baghdad was fatally delayed through the same cause. It seems almost certain that, but for the shortage of river transport, the Turkish Army would have been destroyed between Amara and

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Ctesiphon; and the evidence shows conclusively, according to the Commission, that shortage of river transport was the chief cause of the failure to relieve Kut."

I am also mentioned, but Mr Lloyd George omits to give the Government of India credit for listening to my complaint and sending me back to Mesopotamia with clearly defined powers.

"In January 1916 the Indian Government at last sent an expert civilian, Sir George Buchanan, formerly in charge of the Port of Rangoon, to become Director-General of Basra and reorganise its traffic and facilities. Characteristically they omitted to define his status and duties; and General Nixon proceeded to limit and circumscribe these in such a way that Sir George Buchanan found it impossible to carry on, and soon returned to India."

Admitting the correctness of Mr Lloyd George's main facts, I think there are better reasons than those given in his book for the failure of the Government of India in the conduct of the Mesopotamian Campaign.

It was, I suggest, not so much the "incompetence and slovenly carelessness on the part of the responsible military authorities" as the machine becoming more powerful than the man. Over a course of many years the Government of India had built up the most wonderful machine



for the institution of economy that the world has ever known, all financial power being concentrated in the Government of India.

Powers of expenditure were allotted from Governors of Provinces downwards, strictly according to budget estimates, which themselves were subject to severe criticism by the Government of India. Estimates for public works were scrutinised and rescruinised by various departments in the cold light of finance, and rejected if found in any way financially unsound. Frequent references were necessary to the Secretary of State on matters beyond the sanction even of the Government of India.

Lastly, once estimates were sanctioned, an army of babus spread over India scrutinised the accounts of expenditure, and wrote thousands of sheets of what were known as 'objection statements.'

It was a magnificent system in time of peace, but it did not stand the strain of war. In particular, economy in military expenditure had for years past been the declared policy of the Government of India and Secretary of State, to such an extent that army estimates were cut down to a minimum, and the various heads of the Military Supply Departments and their subordinates had been trained for generations to regard exceeding an estimate as the one unforgivable sin.

It was, therefore, not to be wondered at that when war broke out on a scale unknown in

India, the heads of the Supply Department were found to be totally devoid of imagination and wedded to the machine.

I remember an officer in the higher ranks of the Royal Artillery telling me that in the early stages of the campaign, an urgent telegram was despatched to Simla for more gun ammunition (I forget the size), and the reply from the Director-General of Ordnance was to the effect that by all the rules of war they were exceeding the standard allowance, and what did they mean by asking for more.

I had no difficulty or delay in obtaining sanction from the Government of India for all my requirements, my trouble being in arranging for shipment from Bombay; but I remember asking the head of a department at Basra, who was grumbling about his meagre allowance, why he did not telegraph direct to G.H.Q., Simla, and his reply: "It is all very well for you, who have an independent command, to telegraph to Simla direct, but if I did so the head of my department in India would put a black mark against my name, and I should lose my promotion."

Under such conditions one could not expect supplies of any kind in Mesopotamia to be on the generous side.

It should also be borne in mind that India had already despatched and equipped Expeditionary Forces to France and East Africa, while

the campaign in Mesopotamia alone was to prove a far greater one than any carried out by the Government of India in its long history ; and I was told that at a dinner party in Simla, General Sir Beauchamp Duff remarked that, having sent away the best part of his troops and equipment, another campaign would be started, perhaps in Mesopotamia, and he would be broken.

As an impartial observer I attribute the deplorable collapse in Mesopotamia to the want of a Lloyd George to break the official economic machine which still functioned, although the Government of India were not paying the bill, and to the almost incredible optimism of Sir John Nixon, who dared to advance into the desert from Basra with inadequate transport, an ill-equipped base, and a precarious line of communication.

By July 1916 the Government of India had risen to the occasion and many of the defects had been remedied, but it was plain that the conduct of the campaign had become beyond their unaided capacity, and it was fortunate that the administration was transferred to the War Office during that month.

India had been accused of economy to the extent of penuriousness : the same charge could not be made against the War Office, and it is perhaps not to be wondered at that the pendulum swung a long way in the opposite direction. Apparently the view held was that as the

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war was costing hundreds of millions of pounds, the expenditure of an odd million or so on particular schemes was of no consequence, if the campaign was in any way assisted thereby. Economy was thrown to the winds, no estimates were required, and an officer of the Military Accounts Department called on me and pointed out that under the 'Accounts Manual War' I had unlimited powers in the matter of expenditure, both in the matter of ordering of materials and in the engagement of personnel, and that I could disregard Objection Statements for want of sanction to estimates or spending of money generally. Such an order was sufficient to turn white the black hairs of the babus of India, but it did facilitate operations.

Naturally it led to extravagance, as men who had never before had any powers of expenditure suddenly found themselves endowed with powers to order from overseas what they chose and to carry out work regardless of expense, provided the works themselves had been sanctioned.

It is not difficult to spend a great deal of money under such conditions. The view I held was that in the case of large permanent or semi-permanent works at the base there would have been no material delay, if approximate plans and estimates had been prepared and checked by a technical officer attached to the department of the Inspector-General of Communications.

Some interesting figures on the estimated

## SOME FANTASTIC FIGURES

cost (the actual cost will never be known) of work in Mesopotamia are given in a report for the Army Council by Sir John Hewett (published by H.M. Stationery Office) to show whether expenditure in Mesopotamia charged ultimately against Imperial Army Funds were being duly confined to services necessary for the prosecution of the war. The following are some of the items :—

Inland Water Transport Fleet . . . . .	£9,203,254
Dockyard . . . . .	348,946
Re-erecting Yard . . . . .	215,750
Basra Wharves and Equipment, exclusive of Freight . . . . .	513,255
Electrical and Mechanical Installation at Basra	139,509
Water Works . . . . .	60,440

These figures would be regarded as fantastic in time of peace, but they serve to show the cost of war.

The same remarks apply to personnel which in the Inland Water Transport Department reached the remarkable total of 42,968 in 1918, with an expenditure in the same year of over two million pounds.

In Volume II. of his admirable works on Mesopotamia, Sir Arnold Wilson has erroneously ascribed to me the responsibility for the cost of the construction of the dockyard and wharves at Basra. I had in point of fact nothing whatever to do with the dockyard. I was responsible for the layout and design of the Basra wharves

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and for the construction of wharfage, estimated at about £40,000.

It is curious that Sir John Hewett's report makes no mention of the £3,000,000 utterly wasted on dredging the channel across the Hammar Lake, a description of which is given on pages 133-135 of this book.

I do not suppose there was any greater extravagance in Mesopotamia than in other of the war zones, possibly not so much, the fact being that war itself is the most horrible and disastrous form of waste that can possibly be conceived.

## CHAPTER XV.

IT was pleasant to be in Simla again after the heat and work of Mesopotamia.

Simla, perched on a peak of the Himalayas 7200 feet above sea level, is the summer headquarters of the Government of India, and is certainly unique in its surroundings. To the north and east a network of mountain chains rising range over range is crossed in the distance by a magnificent crescent of snowy peaks extending as far as the eye can reach. The nearest peak is over 16,000 feet high and twenty-seven miles from Simla as the crow flies. The nearest of the central Himalayan peaks is double that distance, but in the clear mountain air stands out so sharply against the horizon that one would think its base could be reached in a march of a few hours.

The change in climate from the plains of India to the hills during the summer months has to be experienced to be appreciated. One day you are in sweltering heat, with electric fans or punkahs going night and day; you are tormented by mosquitoes, and in a constant

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bath of perspiration, and the next day you are in an English summer.

There is, however, periodically, fierce discussion on the unsuitability of Simla as the seat of Government for five months out of the twelve, and the Mesopotamia Commission who had never visited India were eloquent on the subject of the remoteness of Simla from great towns and cantonments and its general inaccessibility, but they slipped up badly when they called it 'a hilltop in the Himalayas on the borders of Nepal,' as it is at least 250 miles from the border of that State.

Regarding accessibility Simla is nearer the large cantonments in Northern India than any other town, and with wireless, telephones, and telegraph offices can be as closely in touch with the various Provinces as if they were on the spot. Delhi can be reached by car in about eight hours, and as high officials make their tours from one end of India to the other in the monsoon or wet-weather months the journey from Simla to Delhi forms but an insignificant portion of the total mileage.

In point of fact, there is probably no other centre in the British Empire where officials, both civil and military, work harder than do those of the Imperial Government, and the people who give Simla its name for idle frivolity are the visitors of both sexes who come to the hills in large numbers for a holiday. Every



provincial government moves its headquarters to somewhere in the hills during the summer months. Bengal to Darjeeling, Madras to Ootacamund, and so on, as they find that from the point of view of efficiency alone the change is necessary.

The distance in Simla from one point to another covers a number of miles, and transport is either on foot, by horse, or rickshaw, the Viceroy, the Commander-in-Chief, and the Governor of the Punjab being the only personages allowed to travel along the narrow mountain roads by carriage or motor car.

There were four hotels, and in one of these my wife was settled down when I arrived. Simla is noted for nicknames, and the hotels were commonly known as 'the Proudies,' 'the Crowdies,' 'the Rowdies,' and 'the Dowdies.'

I had a very good reception in Simla, everyone seemed pleased to see me, although they expressed regret that I had left Mesopotamia. I took an early opportunity of writing a memorandum for the Government of India, giving an account of the work accomplished by myself and my staff, and stating the reason for my return to India, notwithstanding the wish expressed by the Government that I should remain in Mesopotamia.

I went at his request to see the Viceroy (the late Lord Chelmsford), who engaged me in conversation for nearly an hour.

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He reminded me of my interview with him over a year ago when I had come to report the terrible conditions of the port at Basra, and the Government of India had done all in their power to improve matters. Conditions were, however, now changed. India was in disgrace, and the War Office were determined to have their own men in all administrative posts. He attached importance to the writing of my reports on post-war developments in Mesopotamia, and asked for a copy of my memorandum on my work in that country, as he wished to send it to the Secretary of State.

I also called on General Sir Charles Monro, the Commander-in-Chief in India, who had succeeded the unfortunate Sir Beauchamp Duff, and as we had met in Mesopotamia when he was there on a visit he had a number of questions to ask about the work at Basra and up the line.

Sir Charles Monro was a bluff soldier, with a very great military career behind him, but as a member of the Viceroy's Council he had to express an opinion on many matters which were out of his line.

There was a story in Simla that on one occasion a file was presented to him for his remarks on which a young civilian had expressed his views freely, ending up with a Latin tag. It happened to be a subject on which Sir Charles had first-hand knowledge, and his comment was, "I,

too, am a Latin scholar and my opinion on the above proposal is *Non sanguineum bonum!*"

There were great changes since my last visit to Simla, and India was now pulling her full weight in the war, having sent a million men overseas and contributed a hundred million pounds to the Imperial Government towards the cost of the war.

Plain clothes had disappeared from Army Headquarters, and from every station in India, and from the Commander-in-Chief downwards, every soldier was in khaki. This may seem a matter of little importance, but was symbolic of the new spirit.

A new Quartermaster-General had been appointed from England (General Sir Edward Altham), which meant an infusion of new blood into that department. Intensive recruiting for the Indian Army was in progress through a special man-power Board, and an Indian Munition Board (the equivalent of the Ministry of Munitions) had been created, whose functions, as defined by the Secretary of State, were "to control and develop Indian resources with special reference to the needs created by the war, to regulate contracts, to limit and co-ordinate demands for articles not manufactured or produced in India, and to apply the manufacturing resources of India to war purposes with the special object of reducing demands on shipping."

The Board was established as a department

of the Government of India under the Army Member of Council, and there being at that time no politicians in India, its constitution was an eminently practical one.

The Chairman was that loquacious, but very able and forcible personality, Sir Thomas Holland (now Principal and Vice-Chancellor of Edinburgh University), the other members being a railway expert who left the Railway Board to join Munitions, an officer who had been Director General of Ordnance, and the Financial Adviser, Military Finance Department.

Each member was in charge of a department ; there were branches in every Province ; and an immense amount of work was being done in a business-like manner.

Although not directly connected with the war the Government of India had appointed in May 1916 an Indian Industrial Commission, with special reference to the following questions—

- (a) Whether new openings for the profitable employment of Indian capital in commerce and industry can be indicated.
- (b) Whether, and if so, in what manner Government can usefully give direct encouragement to industrial development.
  - (1) By rendering technical advice more freely available.
  - (2) By the demonstration of the practical possibility on a commercial side of particular industries.

## INDUSTRIAL COMMISSION

- (3) By affording directly or indirectly financial assistance to industrial enterprise.
- (4) By any other means which are not incompatible with the existing financial policy of the Government of India.

The Chairman of the Commission was Sir Thomas Holland, and, although the report was not completed until 1918, the fact that the inquiry was proceeding *pari passu* with the work of the Indian Munitions Board, and under the same Chairman, was of considerable assistance to the latter in co-ordinating the resources of India for the purposes of the war.

I was fortunate in being given an office in the building allotted to the Munitions Board, and there I settled down to formulate projects for post-war developments in Mesopotamia aided by the material and data I had collected in the country.

I was a free agent, attached to no department of the Government of India, being still on the strength of the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force, and I found my experience often useful to the Army Headquarters Staff on matters connected with the campaign.

I had not been very long in Simla before there was a recrudescence of the serious delays to shipping at Basra, and I was asked by the Quartermaster-General for a report.

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

I pointed out that, by a curious irony of fate, the management of the port had reverted almost to the state so strongly condemned by the Mesopotamia Commission, and I recommended that control be taken from the Inland Water Transport Department and a separate Port Directorate formed.

This proposal was adopted after the visit to Basra of a Special Transport Commission.

I was also asked to advise on the vexed question of Railways *versus* Inland Water Transport in time of war, and I sent copies of a memorandum on Public Works Expenditure in Mesopotamia, with a recommendation for better financial control, to Sir William Meyer, the Finance Minister, who wrote thanking me for my "interesting and from the financial point of view melancholy memorandum."

## CHAPTER XVI.

By the end of August 1917 I had completed three monographs embodying my views on the development of Mesopotamia, the Conservancy of the Shatt-el-Arab and development of the Port of Basra, and on Communications and Irrigation in Arabistan. Without going too deeply into technicalities, a summary of these papers may prove of interest.

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF MESOPOTAMIA, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE REGENERATION OF THE RIVER SYSTEMS.

When military operations began in Mesopotamia the public mind was filled with the glamour of the name and its past associations.

It was known that in that region one civilisation had followed another, and kingdom succeeded kingdom, from the earliest records of the human race; it was the birthplace of Abraham, the reputed site of the Garden of Eden, and for thousands of years had been one of the richest countries in the world, in a high state of

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

cultivation, traversed throughout by giant irrigation canals conducting the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates to the fertile soil.

According to Herodotus, the whole country was studded with "a vast number of great cities" and a population running into many millions.

The name Babylon conjured up visions of Nebuchadnezzar's palace and the hanging gardens, and Baghdad (which in 833 A.D. had a population of two million souls), with the history of the Caliphs and the story of the Arabian Nights. Even Basra was known as the port from which Sinbad the Sailor departed on his voyages.

The country had once been the granary of the world, and it was hoped that under British rule its former glories would be restored and Egypt rivalled in agricultural development. The glories of the past had, however, long disappeared, and the greater part of Mesopotamia was a miserable wilderness of barren desert alternating with vast swamps, which in the spring-time when the rivers were in flood and overflowed their banks became great lakes.

There was not a single scientific irrigation scheme in operation and less than a million acres was under cultivation, and that of a primitive nature.

There were extensive date groves on the banks of the Shatt-el-Arab River and on the Lower Euphrates, but between Basra and Baghdad



on the Tigris there were only two or three collections of houses that could be described by the name of town. All traces of ancient civilisation had disappeared except the mounds covering the remains of Ur of the Chaldees, Babylon, Nineveh, Seleucia, and other cities of the past, and between Basra and Baghdad all that could be seen was a vast alluvial plain, treeless and stoneless, unrelieved by a single hill or natural eminence of any size and inhabited by nomadic tribes. Such was the state of the country which it was hoped again to restore to its pristine glory.

There is no mystery attached to the ruin of Mesopotamia. There is little doubt that the first settlers found the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates flowing in well-developed beds, and acting as the main drainage channels of the country; there was a small rainfall, and the settlers were obliged to cut canals from the rivers for the watering of their crops. With the increase of population came a demand for the extension of the cultivated area until a large portion of the country was covered with huge canals, the largest being several hundred miles long and broader and deeper than any canal existing to-day in either India or Egypt.

The river channels, deprived of water, accumulated silt and became much reduced in sectional area, but as long as the canals were kept open no particular damage was done.

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

Then came a time when the country was ravaged by war and pestilence, the barrages were destroyed, and the canals silted up, so that the water brought down to the plains every summer through the melting of the snows in the mountains of Armenia, finding insufficient accommodation in the deteriorated river-beds and irrigation canals, spread over the country and formed vast swamps.

Sir W. Willocks assigns the destruction of the Tigris irrigation system to a change in the course of the river whereby the head-works of the canals were destroyed, and it is open to question whether the change was deliberately brought about by the Mongol raiders led by Hulagu or by natural causes. In any case, it seems probable that the gradual deterioration of the canals had been proceeding for thousands of years.

At the time when Baghdad was at the height of its prosperity the canals were admittedly inferior to those of the old Babylonian and Sassanian times. Sir W. Willocks has pointed out that never in the history of Mesopotamia had the whole country been under irrigation at one and the same time, and it seems not unlikely that the centre of cultivation shifted as the various irrigation systems became inoperative, owing to lack of proper drainage and scientific grading of the canals. We know that in Egypt there was no scientific irrigation until

after the British occupation, and there is no reason to suppose that the Babylonians were further advanced than the Egyptians.

There has, however, been a further and progressive deterioration in comparatively modern times which can be seen in operation to-day.

The capture of Baghdad by Hulagu and the final destruction of the irrigation system took place in 1257 A.D., and the country came under the rule of the Turks in 1638 A.D.

The Turks took no action towards the improvement of the country or the restoration of the irrigation system; the irrigation engineering of the ancients had become a lost science, so there was a reversion to primitive methods.

Numerous channels and ditches were cut, opening direct on to the main stream, in order to irrigate a fringe of cultivable land; and although the volume of water taken by each channel was in the first instance small, the effect in the aggregate was sufficient to prevent the river from scouring out the accumulation of silt deposited during flood-time, with the result that there was a corresponding rise in the bed of the river.

At a later stage, the river being raised above the surrounding country, the irrigation channels leading from the river to the land beyond the elevated crest began to scour, since they had a steeper gradient than the river itself, and in some cases absorbed the greater part of the river's

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flow. Such an escape had the effect of increasing and perpetuating the marshes, originally caused by the obstructed drainage, and the accumulated water was compelled to find its way back to the river at a lower point in its bed, or to make a fresh channel to the sea.

The evils were cumulative and ended in the complete disintegration of the rivers and creation of immense marshes. An outstanding example of this progressive disintegration was found in the Tigris, which between Qurna and Amara was described by Colonel Chesney in 1837 as flowing between well-wooded banks with a width of 600 feet and an average depth in the low-water season of 12 to 20 feet, where in 1916 the width was 100 feet and a depth at low water of 4 feet or less.

The Turkish Government at last awakened to the potential wealth in Mesopotamia, and they appointed the late Sir William Willcocks, the eminent irrigation engineer, adviser to the Turkish Ministry of Public Works, with instructions to prepare a complete and comprehensive scheme for the irrigation of Mesopotamia.

Accompanied by a large staff, Sir William Willcocks spent several years in making surveys and investigations, and in 1905 he produced a report, accompanied by plans and sketches, which will remain always a classic in the science of irrigation.

Sir William began his report by pointing out

that irrigation in Mesopotamia and irrigation in Egypt were two entirely different propositions.

“No irrigation engineer who has travelled through Mesopotamia can have failed to have been struck by the great difference between the delta of the Nile and the joint deltas of the Euphrates and Tigris. The Nile is in flood from August to October, and the turbid waters can be retained on the land in the historical basins of Egypt and discharged back into the falling river in November. This permits of the winter cultivation, without further irrigation, of rich fields of wheat, barley, beans, and clover.

Such a system of irrigation is impossible in Mesopotamia. The rivers are in flood in March, April, and May, while the floods are followed by the burning and rainless months of June, July, and August, in which irrigation must be practised if any crop is to be brought to maturity. So that while Egypt was for thousands of years the home of basin irrigation, Mesopotamia was the home of perennial irrigation.”

He classed the Tigris-Euphrates delta as an arid region of twelve million acres, a small fraction of which was adequately irrigated, and he estimated that the available water supply would permit of the irrigation of 7,150,000 acres of winter crops; and of summer crops 1,000,000 acres of rice, or 3,125,000 acres of millet, sesame, cotton, &c., but for the time being he limited his scheme to  $3\frac{1}{2}$  million acres on certain selected areas to be irrigated by the Tigris, Euphrates, and Diyala Rivers.

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The total estimated cost of the project for irrigation and agricultural work was 26 million pounds (probably 40 million at to-day's price), giving a return of 25 per cent on the whole undertaking and 9 per cent on the cost of the irrigation work, while the capital value of the irrigated land at fourteen years' purchase was estimated at 90 million pounds.

I would not presume to criticise Sir William Willcock's technical details, but I did point out that, apparently from his plans, Sir William accepted as a permanency the existing degenerate state of the rivers and that he left untouched the vast swamps in Lower Mesopotamia, spreading ruin and desolation over large areas of country. It might be that his treatment of the subject was the best, but whether the rivers be used for navigation or their waters for irrigation, I was of opinion that their regeneration and reconstitution as the main drainage channels of the country was of the first importance, and that irrigation, drainage, and the maintenance of the rivers should be in harmonious relationship.

There was also the question of navigation, to which I attached some importance. It is an axiom that, if water is required for irrigation, navigation must give way and a railway take its place, but I doubted whether the vast works designed by Sir William Willcocks would be carried out in the near future, and I believed

## IRRIGATION AND NAVIGATION

that for many years to come there would be from the combined waters of the Euphrates and Tigris an ample supply of water both for irrigation and navigation, and that if the regeneration of the rivers was taken in hand, there would be a broad, deep, and well-conserved river admirably adapted for navigation purposes between Basra and beyond Baghdad.

In the matter of railway competition I considered that a well-managed river service would easily hold its own, as the position would not be dissimilar to that which obtained on the Irrawaddy River in Burma, between the towns of Rangoon and Mandalay, where the distance being 780 miles by river and 386 miles by rail the river steamer companies paid a handsome dividend.

Whether in Mesopotamia there would be sufficient trade for both services could only be ascertained as the country developed.

The question of population appeared to me to be by far the most serious factor for consideration in connection with Sir William Willcock's scheme. It is obviously useless to spend millions of pounds in irrigation schemes if there are no people to farm the land when irrigated.

In India and Egypt, where extensive irrigation works have been carried out, there has been a teeming population waiting to form irrigation colonies the moment water was available.

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

The population of Egypt is 1000 to the square mile, the Indian Punjab 177 per square mile, and Bengal 540 per square mile ; but in Mesopotamia there is a population of only 10 to the square mile, consisting chiefly of untamed nomadic tribes with an ancient prescriptive right to the occupation of large areas, and who from all accounts would bitterly resent the intrusion of peaceful colonists.

Sir William Willcocks had visions of " thousands and tens of thousands of industrious labourers from Kurdistan and the Persian Hills flocking to the delta of the Tigris, but the late Miss Gertrude Bell had no illusions on the subject and pointed out the probability of permanent discontent and unrest attending the introduction of agricultural colonists who belonged to an alien and non-absorbable population.

The future of Mesopotamia was at the time of my report being widely discussed, and I devoted much time and thought to the subject. My final conclusions and recommendations were embodied in the following paragraphs :—

(1) In the first place, I would deprecate anything being done in a hurry. The country is in the most deplorable condition through human abuse in the past, and it is essential that treatment should be on correct lines—all questions being dealt with on the broadest basis, instead of being narrowed down at the outset.



## ENGINEERING PROBLEMS

(2) An engineering survey of the country and rivers is a *sine qua non* before money is expended on capital works.

Sir William Willcocks' surveys are of the greatest value, so far as they go, but they were carried out under most difficult conditions and require to be very much amplified.

(3) In my judgment the problems before the engineer are—

(a) The regeneration of the rivers as the main drainage channels of the country and their preservation for navigation if compatible with irrigation.

(b) The economical application of the water for irrigation.

(c) The drainage of the swamps.

I have placed irrigation as second to river regeneration, because I am of the opinion that better results will be obtained by improving the rivers and developing local agriculture than by beginning at once with irrigation works on a heroic scale—this will follow in due course.

(4) Although it is to be taken for granted that if water is required for irrigation, navigation must give way, I believe it will be many years before irrigation develops to such an extent; and meanwhile navigation for commercial purposes should be encouraged, whilst if river improvements are carried out small tolls or charges would be justified.

(5) There is a wide field for a really competent Agricultural Adviser.

(6) Although I do not think it practicable to develop the country during military operations, there is a great deal of preliminary work in the

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

organisation of survey parties and the consideration of the lines on which to start work which might be put in hand at once.

Finally, I would recommend that in the development of Mesopotamia and in the preliminary investigations incidental thereto the services be obtained of the best experts in their respective professions; and so far as irrigation is concerned, I need hardly point out that India, who supplied the original engineers for Egypt, possesses the most extensive irrigation works in the world and the engineers with the widest experience.

Towards the end of 1917 it became absolutely necessary to take in hand irrigation and agricultural development, because famine was threatening the civil population in certain areas, and the military authorities required large quantities of cereals, mainly barley and bhusa, for the needs of the army.

The Turkish Government had, before the war, built (under the Willcocks project) a barrage on the Hindia branch of the Euphrates, but the scheme had never been completed and was lying derelict; military operations had in various parts destroyed cultivation, and everywhere the canals had deteriorated. An Irrigation Directorate was formed in February 1918 and experts obtained from India, but to carry out a programme of irrigation work at high pressure, with few facilities for preliminary investigation and in some areas almost within sound of the

## IRRIGATION DIRECTORATE

enemy's guns, was extremely difficult. There was a great shortage of labour—practically no skilled labour, and tribal disturbances suspended the work on two most important canals.

Nevertheless, the Irrigation Directorate did an immense amount of useful work, chiefly on the Lower Euphrates where the Hindia barrage had been repaired and new canals cut, and the amount of additional grain harvested by the tribes saved a famine and materially contributed to the requirements of the army.

A number of reports were made by various experts who did not always agree on the correct procedure, and large areas of country were surveyed.

On the 1st March 1919 the Irrigation and Agricultural Directorate with 104 British officers were transferred from the army to the civil administration. It immediately became necessary drastically to cut down the staff and reduce expenditure. The history of irrigation and agriculture from that day makes melancholy reading. The cultivation of cotton on which so many hopes were raised has proved a failure, and no action has been taken towards the regeneration of the river systems ; but plans and estimates have been prepared for the execution of portions of Sir William Willcocks' scheme, notably the Kut Barrage and the Habbaniyah escape for the diversion of the flood-waters of the Euphrates, and it is anticipated these works will be carried

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out as funds become available. So far as one can judge, a hundred years may pass and the greater part of Mesopotamia, or Iraq as it is now called, will remain the dreary wilderness that it was when the British first marched through the country, and yet by the expenditure of capital in large amounts and the employment of agriculturists of the type to be found in Turkey, India, or Egypt the country might again, to quote Sir William Willcocks, "blossom like the rose."

### THE PORT OF BASRA AND CONSERVANCY OF THE SHATT-EL-ARAB.

As already stated, when discussing the development of S.W. Persia, I had conceived the idea of making Basra the principal seaport, not only of Mesopotamia, but of Persia, and I visualised Basra becoming one of the great ports of the East, comparable to Karachi, from which it is 1160 miles distant. The existing Persian Gulf ports I contemplated serving by coasting steamers from Basra rather than from Europe or India direct, as it would not pay the large deep-draught steamers to call at the small ports on their way to Basra.

I therefore planned in detail the future civil port of Basra, the form of administration, lines of finance, and correct methods of raising revenue

## DEVELOPMENT OF BASRA PORT

from rates and dues, the accommodation required for the ocean export and import trades, the inland vessels trade, and trade with Persia.

The necessity for a deep, well-lighted and buoyed channel from Basra to the sea being of paramount importance, I prepared a scheme for the removal of the outer bar and described the type of dredger required and how the scheme should be financed, and also made recommendations regarding lighting and buoying and pilotage.

Alas! my hopes have not been fulfilled: Basra is not a British port, the trade with Persia is lessening every year instead of increasing, and will stop altogether when the Shah has completed his own railway and port in the gulf.

Agriculture has not developed to any extent, and imports and exports through Basra are much the same as they were before the war. The Shatt-el-Arab bar has been removed, but principally in the interest of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, who pay most of the annual bill for dredging.

## IRRIGATION IN ARABISTAN.

Arabistan is in Persia, a country in which the British have now neither interest nor influence. It is potentially one of the richest of the Persian

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

Provinces, producing dates, wheat, barley, rice, and a certain amount of cotton. It was at one time irrigated throughout its length and breadth, and at a moderate expenditure could again be made a source of great wealth and a home for many people.

## CHAPTER XVII.

THE term of my deputation to Simla finished on the 13th of September, and the Secretary of State had been asked for orders as to my further employment or return to my substantive post at Rangoon.

On the 12th August I received a telegram from Sir Percy Cox containing the words, "Best congratulations," which conveyed nothing to me, as I was not aware that anything had transpired on which I was to be congratulated; but on making inquiries from the Military Secretary to the Commander-in-Chief I was informed that I had been awarded a Knight Commandership of the Indian Empire and that it would be gazetted very shortly. This was followed by a personal letter of congratulation from the Commander-in-Chief (Sir Charles Monro). I was naturally very pleased at this recognition of the hard work I had done in Mesopotamia, and it came as a great surprise.

On the 26th of September orders were received that I was to be transferred temporarily to the Railway Board for the purpose of examining the

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Port of Chittagong on the Karnafuli River in Eastern Bengal, and on the 27th of September I relinquished my military title, resumed civilian clothes, and left Simla for Calcutta and Chittagong.

My instructions were to furnish the Board with advice as regards the engineering works, and improvements necessary, to make the port suitable for accommodating ships of the largest class, and to give my views on finance and administration. It was a far cry from the River Tigris to the Karnafuli River, but I found the problems very similar, and having obtained all the local data available I returned to Simla on the 11th of October 1917. On the 17th of October I received a letter from the Secretary to the Government of India confirming the termination of my appointment in Mesopotamia, and concluding as follows :—

“ I am also to convey the appreciation of His Majesty's Secretary of State for India of the valuable services rendered by you and to say that the Government of India associate themselves with the Secretary of State's appreciation of your work. The success of our arms in Mesopotamia has been sensibly promoted by your valuable advice, great powers of organisation, and experience of the conditions of Indian ports.”

This letter gave me as much satisfaction as the conferment of the K.C.I.E., my only regret



being that I had not been permitted to complete my service in Mesopotamia up to the end of the war. I cannot, however, attach much importance to or give myself any particular credit for the work I and my staff accomplished in Mesopotamia. I was not a soldier, but I did know my job, which was the construction and management of a large port, and the measures to be taken to improve rivers for navigation purposes.

That this special knowledge could be utilised, and was indeed of vital importance for the successful prosecution of the war, was not at first recognised; but if, at an early date in the campaign, I, or anyone with my qualifications, had been sent to Basra, and given a fairly free hand both on the rivers and at the base, a great deal of trouble and expense would have been avoided.

I now began the Chittagong report, expecting to return to Basra when it was completed; but on the 26th of October the President of the Indian Munitions Board asked me to see him, when he said he had been authorised by the Viceroy to offer me a seat on the Board, to take charge of the whole of the Ordnance factories in India, it having been decided to transfer them from the control of the Director-General of Ordnance to that of the Munitions Board.

I gladly accepted, and was gazetted to the office on the 8th of November 1917. The appointment meant work of a responsible nature

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

in connection with the war and until the end of the war : headquarters with the Government of India at Simla in the summer and Delhi in the winter and an immense amount of touring, as the factories, comprising ammunition, gun and shell, gun-carriages, rifles, harness and saddlery, and cordite, were spread over India, and employed 40 Ordnance Officers and 40,000 employees.

I still retained a connection with Mesopotamia, because the Munitions Board were sending there immense quantities of ammunition and stores of all kinds ; indeed, one of the reasons for my appointment was my intimate knowledge of the country and its requirements.

The news from Mesopotamia continued to be good, although the most difficult part of the campaign occurred after the capture of Baghdad.

On the 18th of November 1917 we were shocked to hear of the death of General Maude from cholera on that day. A great soldier, one cannot tell to what height he might not have risen, his one weak point being his intense centralisation—with a hundred dogs to bark for him he would insist on doing all the barking himself. To quote his own biographer, Major-General Sir C. E. Callwell :—

“ But the characteristic of Maude which was the most strongly marked and was the most open to objection from the soldier’s point of view was his tendency to centralise, his almost irresistible

## THE ARMISTICE

instinct for doing whatever had to be done himself, his plan of keeping everything in his own hands.”<sup>1</sup>

During the year 1918 I was fully occupied with work connected with my branch of the Indian Munitions Board. We extended and expanded the various Ordnance factories and increased their output enormously.

On 30th October 1918 an armistice was signed with Turkey, and all hostilities ceased. The terms of the armistice were not intended to bear relation to the territorial settlement to be imposed by the Allies at the Peace Conference; and although the Turks evacuated the Mosul Province on the 9th of November, they did so under protest.

<sup>1</sup> 'Life of Sir Stanley Maude.' By Major-General Sir C. E. Callwell, K.C.B.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

THE total British casualties in Mesopotamia amounted to about 100,000, and the approximate cost to 350 million pounds.<sup>1</sup>

It may be asked what have we got to show for this great expenditure in blood and treasure, and would it really have mattered very much had the Turks drained the Tigris dry and stopped Sir John Nixon's advance from Basra. We should still have retained control of the Shatt-el-Arab River and the outlet of the Anglo-Persian oil-fields, which was the primary reason for the despatch of an expeditionary force to the Persian Gulf.

We have freed the Arab from the Turk and created a new State, with which we have signed a treaty of perpetual peace and friendship and formed a mutually defensive alliance. We virtually control the land and air routes to India, and have the right to establish air bases and make the fullest use of the country in time of

<sup>1</sup> Mr Winston Churchill, House of Commons Debate, 9th March 1922.

war. But we have paid a very high price for these privileges.

In the early days of the war when the British were battling their way up the Tigris, it was taken for granted that at the end of the campaign Mesopotamia would become a British possession, or, at least, a British Protectorate, probably controlled from India. There did not seem to be any possible alternative; it was what we had always done in days gone by, and no one could foresee the intense wave of national feeling and resentment at any kind of foreign control, which, encouraged by Mr Woodrow Wilson, was to spread throughout the world. The magic words self-determination, implying to very many people complete freedom from all restraint; in short, a glorified anarchy.

To students of past history a somewhat parallel case appeared to be the conquest of Upper Burma, which was annexed to the Empire on the 1st of January 1886, the circumstances attending which were not dissimilar. A river, the Irrawaddy, the main line of communication, a steamer flotilla to convey troops and stores, a people to be freed from a despotic king, and after two years' guerilla warfare the complete settlement and pacification of the country, which, under British rule, became prosperous and wealthy, with a happy and contented peasantry.

One wonders what would have been the state of Burma now had there then existed a League

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of Nations, Government by Mandate, and Mr Woodrow Wilson's fourteen points.

In Mesopotamia we began unfortunately by issuing to the inhabitants of every town we entered ambiguous and almost apologetic proclamations, emphasising that the British mission was to free the Arab from the tyranny and oppression of the Turk—proclamations which culminated in the truly remarkable document that in opposition to his wishes was issued at Baghdad under the signature of General Maude.

I have often wondered whether there was in reality any terrible oppression by the Turk. Outside the towns the whole population of the country is tribal, and the tribes were quite competent to hold their own; there were vast areas where the Turkish writ did not run and the Turks were unable to collect taxes, while in their treatment of minorities the Government of Iraq has shown that it had nothing to learn in the way of cruelty and oppression.

It is a matter for conjecture whether the old Turkish Government, which was an Oriental bureaucracy, did not suit the people admirably; indeed, Sir Arnold Wilson stated in a lecture on the 15th of April 1921:—

“My belief is that were a plebiscite to be taken to-day in Iraq on the issue of Turkish *versus* Arab Government there would be a large majority in favour of the return of the Turk.”

Looking back it is sad to think of the amount of solid pioneer work which the British accomplished, only to be abandoned, between the years 1915 and 1920. When Basra was captured, riot and anarchy were rampant, and it was imperative to restore order as quickly as possible. This was done in the first instance by the military, but within a week a highly competent police officer, with long experience on the North-West Frontier, had arrived with a staff, and, working under the orders of the Military Authorities, began the establishment of police posts throughout the district, the first police being Muslims from the Punjab.

Under the Hague Convention, in occupied territories the laws in force in the country were to be respected if possible, but at Basra the Turkish officials had fled, and with them most of the official records disappeared.

Sir Percy Cox, the Chief Political Officer, and Captain A. T. Wilson (now Sir Arnold Wilson), the Deputy Chief Political Officer, had therefore a clean sheet of paper on which to frame a new civil administration, subject always to the orders of the Army Commander.

The task was an arduous one, especially in connection with the collection of revenue, but gradually the threads were gathered together and a successful Revenue Department created, following as nearly as possible the old Turkish system. Other important departments were

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

Customs, Health, and Posts and Telegraphs. The re-establishment of judicial administration was difficult, and it was found necessary to frame a code known as the Iraq Occupied Territories Code, which was based on the Indian Civil and Criminal Codes, but outside the towns the Sheikh in his tent administered justice in accordance with tribal laws and customs.

Regarding general administration, each town was controlled by a Military Governor, and the territory was divided into districts and sub-districts in charge of Political and Assistant Political Officers, whose duties were to maintain order, settle disputes, collect revenue, and to see that in every respect the demands of the military were fully complied with.

The zone of administration increased as military operations were extended, and at the armistice on the 31st of October 1918 the whole of the Basra and Baghdad Provinces were occupied, and largely through the energy and genius of Colonel A. T. Wilson (now Sir Arnold Wilson, M.P.) an honest and efficient civil administration was in force throughout the territory.

The work accomplished appeared to have the full approval of the British Government. Speaking in the House of Commons on the 23rd of July 1918 Lord Robert Cecil, Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, said:—

“ As regards the operations of the Mesopotamia Political Administration, very satisfactory pro-



## WORK ACCOMPLISHED

gress is being made in redeeming the country from the state of ruin into which it had fallen under the Turk. Thirteen Government primary schools, four municipal State-aided schools, a teachers' training school, and a survey school have been opened ; extension classes in agriculture have also been started. The local demand for education is very insistent and is being met as rapidly as the supply of teachers will permit. Large tracts of land, hitherto untilled, have been brought before the plough through the continued efforts of the people and the political administration. Use has been made of mechanical tractors and artillery horses, which have supplemented the ordinary means of cultivation. The opening up of the country by road, rail, and improved water transport, and the establishment of security on the highways, have resulted in an increase of trade and the lowering of prices of commodities.

The contrast in the improved condition of Mesopotamia and that of the neighbouring country occupied by the Turk, where disorder and famine are chronic, has not failed to impress the population and its leaders, the local notables and the tribal chiefs. The relations between the troops and the people are excellent, and a spirit of harmony and co-operation prevails. The opinion is frequently expressed that the British people mean well by the Arab race."

Similar words of praise were given by Lord Curzon, Acting Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, who, speaking in the House of Lords on 20th February 1919, observed :—

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“ The advance that has been made in the last two years in the development of Mesopotamia in respect of irrigation, agriculture, planting, the introduction of agricultural machinery, the education of children, and in many other ways has been amazing. More has been done in two years for those places than has been done in the five preceding centuries, and I cannot imagine a more proud experience for any Englishman than if he were now to go out to Mesopotamia and see what is being accomplished there.

“ And, lest it be thought that I am unduly blowing the trumpet of my own race, I should like to read one sentence from a report which reached me the other day from a very distinguished American who had recently, in the interest of relief, visited that part of the world. He said: ‘ The work accomplished by the British since their occupation has been excellent in all respects. The population are free and happy. Justice is administered, life and property are secure. There are no shadows in this picture.’ My Lords, that is a glowing, but I believe not an exaggerated, tribute.”

Meanwhile, pending the decision of the Peace Conference, it was impossible to decide upon the nature of the ultimate form of Government to be established, and there was a considerable and growing political agitation in Baghdad against British control.

There was an important debate in the House of Commons on 25th March 1920, when Mr Asquith urged that we should confine our responsibilities to the Province of Basra and withdraw

## PROPOSALS FOR EVACUATION

from Mosul and Baghdad. Mr Lloyd George dissented from such an opinion, and said he could understand withdrawal from the whole country but not a partial withdrawal. He asked if it were not for the benefit of the people of that country that it should be governed so as to enable them to develop a land which had been withered and shrivelled by oppression, and did one imagine that if we withdrew there would be any improvement at all. If the only central government they have is taken away, another must be put in its place, and he believed the people almost without exception were anxious that the British Government should stay there; but it was not proposed we should govern the country as if it were an essential part of the British Empire. The people should govern themselves, and we should be responsible for advising, for counselling, and assisting an Arab Government.

What did not seem to be realised was that, although it was easy to talk about an Arab Government, there were at that time no Arabs capable of forming a Government. On the other hand, there were numerous critics who accused Colonel Wilson of trying to Indianise Mesopotamia by setting up a bureaucratic administration analogous to that in an Indian province; but as Indian Provincial Administration was at that time the most efficient in the world, it is difficult to see where the complaint lay. In any

case, there was no alternative or better method available.

The Administration consisted of a Civil Commissioner working under the orders of the Commander-in-Chief, and a Secretariat with Secretaries in charge of Revenue, Finance, Judicial, Public Works, and Health Departments.

The occupied territories were divided for administrative purposes into sixteen divisions, under Political Officers who corresponded direct with the Civil Commissioner and the various secretaries. Local self-government was being encouraged by the setting up of Municipal Councils wherever possible, with tribal councils for tribal districts, and the health and welfare of the people was being cared for by numerous public utility schemes. The Civil Administration paid its way, the principal sources of revenue being land and customs, which in 1915-1916 amounted to £29,000, and in 1919-1920, when the whole country was occupied, to £2,790,000—the total revenue in each case being £30,500 in 1915-1916 and £3,300,000 in 1919-1920. Receipts in each year exceeded expenditure without excessive taxation.

Another criticism against the Administration was that an undue number of British officers were employed, the inference being that a number of responsible administrative positions should have been given to Arabs. The critics did not, however, realise that up to the end of 1920 the Government was a military one, imposed by the

necessities of war. Actually, on the 1st of August 1920, there were 1022 British officers (which included all those employed in the technical departments of irrigation, transport, and general public works), 2216 Indians, and 8566 Arabs; but after the creation of the Arab State very few British officers and no Indian officials remained.

The weakness of the Civil Administration was that, although honest and efficient, it had perhaps tried to advance too fast; it had been established by force of arms, and was not given time to adjust itself to conditions of peace; it was good government without being in any sense self-government.

“This administration surviving the armistice was found to be too enterprising and too expensive. It is easy to say that this result ought to have been foreseen. It is not easy to discover either how early it actually was foreseen or what different system could have been adopted.”<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, the people appeared satisfied and prepared to settle down. In the words of Miss Gertrude Bell—

“Before the armistice the people of Mesopotamia had accepted the fact of British occupation and were resigned to the prospect of British administration. Sections of the inhabitants were

<sup>1</sup> Extract from the ‘History of the Peace Conference at Paris.’ Edited by H. W. V. Temperley.

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more than resigned, they looked forward with satisfaction to a future in which they would be able to pursue commerce and agriculture in profitable security, with a strong central authority preserving peace and order, and this frame of mind was probably most prevalent where British rule had been longest established. As early as 1917 the inhabitants of Basra made public declaration of their contentment with a condition of affairs which allowed them to engage in business with the certainty of advantage; they observed with truth that their town had made almost incredible progress, and they recognised, gratefully that the comfort of their lives had been increased beyond all anticipation. . . .

Roughly outlined, such was the temper of Basra, Amara, Hillah, and the country districts generally; Baghdad, which is a far more active centre of political thought than any other part of Iraq, had not spoken.”<sup>1</sup>

Had it been possible at the time of the armistice to proclaim a British Protectorate over the whole of Iraq, and thereafter to establish an administration which would give the Arabs a considerable voice in management of their affairs, there seems little doubt that it would have been welcomed by the majority of the inhabitants; but it was not possible, and in place of such a notification there was published in November 1918 the Anglo-French declaration stating that “the end in view was the complete and definite

<sup>1</sup> ‘Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia during the British Military Occupation.’ By Miss Gertrude Bell.

liberation of the peoples so long oppressed by the Turks and the establishment of national governments and administrations drawing their authority from the initiative and free choice of the indigenous population."

To add fuel to the flames, Mr Woodrow Wilson's twelfth point was made public about the same time, saying that "the nationalities now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development."

The Acting Civil Commissioner (Colonel Wilson) was under no illusions as to the effect on the people of the Anglo-French declaration, which he condemned as a disastrous error, which nothing in the political situation rendered necessary. He pointed out that, with the experience of his Political Officers behind him, he could confidently declare that the country as a whole neither expected nor desired any such sweeping scheme of independence. He was in favour of declaring Mesopotamia a British Protectorate, and he emphasised the impossibility in these days of creating a new Sovereign Mohammedan State by diplomatic or administrative means, out of the remnants of the Turkish Empire.

The country, and especially Baghdad and Mosul, soon became hotbeds of political intrigue, with the extremists and the Mesopotamian officers in Syria clamouring for complete and immediate

independence. Patriotism is seldom disinterested, and only a Mesopotamia free from British control seemed to offer them hope of the sweets and spoils of office.

The Anglo-French declaration was published in November 1918, but it was not until May 1920 that the announcement was made that, at the Council of the principal Allied Powers at San Remo in April 1920, Great Britain had accepted the Mandates for Mesopotamia and Palestine, and France that for Syria and the Lebanon.

Annexation of a conquered territory or the creation of a Protectorate can be understood, but the altruistic scheme for Mandates, invented, it is said, by Mr. Woodrow Wilson and General Smuts, introduced an entirely new feature in international affairs. Embodied in Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations the idea of the Mandate as opposed to annexation or a Protectorate was that territories inhabited by backward peoples unable to stand by themselves should be placed under the tutelage of such of the more advanced nations who were willing to accept the responsibility of administering them as a sacred trust on behalf of the League and subject to the supervision of a Permanent Mandates Commission.

The Mandates were of various classes, and with reference to the communities formerly belonging to the Turkish Empire, of which



Mesopotamia was one, it was stated that they had already reached a stage of development where their existence as independent nations could be provisionally recognised, subject to the administrative advice and assistance by the Mandatory until such time as they were able to stand alone.

What would happen if the Mandatory power left the League does not seem to have been considered; a case in point being Japan, who has left the League but holds the Mandate for the Pacific Islands, which formerly belonged to Germany, and undertook to promote the moral and material welfare of the inhabitants.

Definite steps had now been taken to decide on the form of Government to be set up under the Mandate; and although a plebiscite had already shown a majority in favour of British control, the Acting Civil Commissioner was directed to take immediate measures in consultation with the Councils, and with the approval of local opinion in all parts of the country, to frame definite proposals for the creation of a form of civil administration based upon representative indigenous institutions, which would pave the way for the creation of an independent Arab State of Iraq.

The Acting Civil Commissioner replied on 8th May 1920 that it was for His Majesty's Government as Mandatory power to prescribe what form of government should be set up in the

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

immediate future, and that a reference afresh to the Councils and people would merely play into the hands of the extremists, who were already very active. Proposals and counter-proposals were considered in London with the atmosphere in Baghdad getting tenser every day, until on the 9th of June the Acting Civil Commissioner sent a telegram which may be regarded as his last word ; his conclusion being that Britain could not maintain her position as Mandatory by a policy of conciliation of extremists, and that having set her hand to the task of regenerating Mesopotamia, she must be prepared to furnish alike men and money and to maintain continuity of control for years to come, that she must be prepared—regardless of the League of Nations—to go very slowly with constitutional or democratic institutions, the application of which to Eastern countries had been attempted of late years with such a little degree of success, and that if His Majesty's Government regarded such a policy as beyond their strength (as well they might) he submitted that they would do better to face the alternative, formidable—and from the local point of view terrible—as it was, and evacuate Mesopotamia. These proposals were rejected as unacceptable, and on the 20th of June the following announcement was made in Baghdad :—

“ His Majesty's Government, having been entrusted with the Mandate for Iraq, anticipate

that the Mandate will constitute Iraq an independent State under guarantee of the League of Nations and subject to the Mandate of Great Britain; that it will lay on them the responsibility for the maintenance of internal peace and external security, and will require them to formulate an Organic Law to be framed in consultation with the people of Iraq and with due regard to the rights, wishes, and interests of all the communities of the country. The Mandate will contain provisions to facilitate the development of Iraq as a self-governing State until such time as it can stand by itself, when the Mandate will come to an end.

"The inception of this task His Majesty's Government have decided to entrust to Sir Percy Cox, who will accordingly return to Baghdad in the autumn, and will resume his position on the termination of the existing Military Administration as Chief British Representative in Iraq.

"Sir Percy Cox will be authorised to call into being, as provisional bodies, a Council of State under an Arab President and a General Elective Assembly representative of and freely elected by the population of Iraq. And it will be his duty to prepare, in consultation with the General Elective Assembly, the permanent Organic Law."

On the 22nd of June the announcement was read to the House of Commons by Mr Montagu, and a debate followed, in which the military expenditure and general policy was freely discussed, Mr Asquith again proposing an immediate retirement to Basra. It was now being realised in England that, unlike Egypt, which had at the

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beginning of our occupation a thriving community and produced a cotton for which there was an immediate demand in Europe, Mesopotamia, with a scanty population, produced nothing of commercial value except dates ; and although the country was potentially wealthy, a large capital sum would be required for development and irrigation, which could have been provided under a Protectorate but not under the Mandate. It was admitted that the civil administration, although expensive, paid its way, but the cost of the army of occupation was estimated at anything between 30 and 40 millions of pounds per annum, and preparations were being made for the construction of permanent cantonments and barracks.

The glamour of Mesopotamia had gone, and the chief idea of the people at home was to liquidate their liabilities as quickly as possible, even to the extent of evacuating the country and allowing the Turks to resume possession.

In July 1920 to add to the difficulties of the situation, and in spite of the declaration promising independence, Arab Nationalists from Syria deliberately provoked a serious revolutionary and anarchic rebellion, which, starting amongst the tribes of the Euphrates, rapidly spread through a large portion of the country, accompanied by wholesale murder and outrage. The rebellion was put down with a strong hand, and its back was broken by October. It did not

## COLONEL WILSON RETIRES

advance the cause of the Nationalists one iota, inflicted an immense amount of damage, cost 426 British lives, 1843 wounded and missing, 8450 casualties among the rebels, and added many millions of pounds to our war debt.\*

Sir Percy Cox arrived as High Commissioner on the 1st of October 1920, and on the 5th of October Colonel A. T. Wilson, who had acted for Sir Percy Cox for two and a half years, left Mesopotamia. A great man, he possessed the courage of his convictions, and had the conquest of Mesopotamia taken place thirty years earlier, and Colonel Wilson been in the same position, it would have been a very different country to-day.

Military control ceased with the appointment of the High Commissioner, and within a month of Sir Percy Cox's arrival a Provisional Council of State had been formed, and the task begun of destroying the magnificent European organisation set up throughout the country, and substituting an inexperienced untried Arab Executive; while such of the British officials who remained, apart from the technical experts, were retained as Advisers to the new Ministers or were employed as Administrative Inspectors under the Arab heads of districts. Actual power was, however, still vested in the High Commissioner representing the Mandatory Authority.

On the 18th August 1921, as the result of considerable wire-pulling and a referendum to

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the people, the Emir Faisul, son of the King of the Hejaz, who had been ejected by the French from the Kingship of Syria, was elected King of Iraq. On the 23rd of August he ascended the throne, and the High Commissioner became an Adviser, but whose advice the King was pledged to follow.

Under the terms of the Mandate Great Britain assumed grave responsibilities to the League of Nations, but, as might have been expected, the Iraqi Nationalists and political agitators claimed that they were quite competent to administer their country free from tutelage in any shape or form, and with the support of the King began a violent campaign of calumny and vituperation against the Mandate.

The very word was anathema, and in a short time the nation that had rescued the Iraqis from the oppression of the Turks became more hated than the Turks themselves had ever been. To quote the late Lord Cromer in 'Ancient and Modern Imperialism': "It is indeed one of the inevitable incidents of Imperial Policy that as a political force the gratitude shown to the foreigner who relieves oppression is of a very ephemeral character."

It is not within the province of this work to describe the bitter wranglings between the Mandatory power and the Iraqis which proceeded continuously from the date of the Mandate in 1920 until the admission of Iraq to the League

of Nations in October 1932; the Iraqis on the one side clamouring for complete independence and Great Britain on the other only too anxious to be free of all commitments in the country, but mindful of her responsibilities to the League of Nations.

The fullest details of that stormy period are given in an admirable work recently published, entitled 'Iraq, a Study in Political Development,' by P. W. Ireland; I will therefore content myself with a brief résumé of events.

The financial commitments of Great Britain in the country had amounted to 32 million pounds in 1920-1921, but by substituting for the army of occupation several squadrons of the Air Force and native levies, expenditure was reduced to a little over 4 million pounds in 1925-1926, and later to 1½ million pounds, while the hostility of the Iraqis to the Mandate was modified by the substitution of a treaty of alliance and subsidiary agreements for the Mandatory terms.

The treaty was for twenty years, subsequently reduced to four years from the date of the ratification of the peace with Turkey, but even with this modification the treaty was only ratified in June 1924, after the presentation of an ultimatum by the High Commissioner. In November 1925 it was finally settled that the Province of Mosul, which was claimed by the Turks, should be awarded to Iraq, but the League of Nations

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insisted on the continuation of the Mandatory régime for another twenty-five years, unless Iraq was admitted within that period to the League of Nations.

The award of Mosul with its rich oil-fields was of paramount importance to the new State, but such was the intensity of feeling at the extension of the Mandate period that many Iraqis were willing to give Mosul to Turkey, if by doing so their independence could be accelerated. Wiser councils prevailed, but the agitation for the termination of the Mandate never<sup>n</sup> ceased, and in September 1929 the Iraq Government was informed that the British Government were prepared to support Iraq's candidature for admission to the League of Nations in 1932.

On the receipt of a communication from the British Government the Permanent Mandates Commission began inquiries into the conditions under which the Mandate might be terminated, and were by no means satisfied as to the progress of Iraq or the future safety of the minorities; but the British Government were not prepared to face any more difficulties with an ungrateful and rebellious people, and persisted in strongly supporting the application even to the extent of stating that "should Iraq prove herself unworthy of the confidence which has been placed in her, the moral responsibility must rest with His Majesty's Government."



## MASSACRE OF ASSYRIANS

In January 1932 the Commission agreed to the admission of Iraq, and on the 3rd October 1932 Iraq took her place in the League of Nations and became on paper a Sovereign Democratic State, governed by a Constitutional Monarch, a nominated Senate, and an elected House of Representatives. The High Commissioner became an Ambassador, and an offensive and defensive alliance was entered into between the two countries.

Subsequent events showed that there was much justification for the opposition to the termination of the Mandate, and for the doubts cast by Sir Arnold Wilson on the possibility of creating a new Mohammedan State out of the remnants of the Turkish Empire.

In August 1933, ten months after her admission to the League of Nations, the world was shocked by the brutal assassination of 600 Assyrians by order of General Baquir Sidqi of the Iraq Army, who, when he returned to Baghdad sitting in a carriage on the right hand of the Prime Minister, received a tremendous ovation and a promotion in rank. Shortly afterwards, on the 8th of September, and largely as the result of the Assyrian troubles, King Faisal died, and was succeeded by his son, King Ghazi, a youth of twenty-two years of age.

King Faisal's death was a very great blow to Iraq. His was an outstanding personality, and, veiled under constitutional form, he ruled his

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kingdom in the only way understood by Orientals —“ L'état c'est moi.”

Had he lived and overcome the Assyrian scandal he would have seen to it that Iraq redeemed her reputation and settled down as a worthy member of the League. Unfortunately he died, and there was no one who could take his place ; and in October 1936 General Baquir Sidqi, a strong pro-Turk, the hero of the Assyrian massacres and who had been equally ruthless in suppressing some tribal rebellions, advanced with troops and Air Force to Baghdad and accomplished a *coup d'état*.

The city was bombed, the Minister of Defence murdered, and a military dictatorship established. His reign was, however, short, as ten months later, on 12th August 1937, General Baquir Sidqi was himself murdered along with his friend, the Commander of the Iraq Air Force.

Now one wonders what will be the next move and who will rise to power ?

King Ghazi has not the personality of his father. The country has travelled a long way from the ideal democratic State authorised by the League of Nations, and has in the customary Eastern fashion reverted to an oligarchy composed of men who are as yet inexperienced in modern forms of Government. There have been twenty-one Cabinets in fifteen years, obtained by ringing the changes on one small group of politicians. The people are not politically minded,

and the Deputies in the Parliament, supposed to be elected by the free vote of the people, are generally nominated or otherwise jobbed into their seats by the party in power.

Many of the officials are necessarily lacking in administrative ability and a sense of responsibility and all are drawn from the town-bred class, while in no country is the gulf wider between the townsman and the countryman. Further, there is between the two classes the conflict in religious observance, so frequently provocative of disorder, the ruling class belonging to the Sunni branch of the Mohammedan faith, while the majority of the country people are ardent followers of the Shiah sect.

The integrity of the country is maintained by the treaty with Great Britain; otherwise there are reasons for thinking that large sections of the populace would not be adverse to the return of the Turk under Kemal Ataturk, especially as Turkey could bring into the country large numbers of skilled agriculturists, to whom there would not be the same objection as to immigrants from India.

The present Government is spending considerable sums on capital works, and a five-year programme has been approved, during which period it is proposed to spend £8,250,000. Of this amount, £2,750,000 is allocated to the Army and the balance to roads, buildings, bridges, telephones, and irrigation. The necessary funds

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are to be provided by the royalties collected from the oil companies and by a  $4\frac{1}{2}$  per cent loan of £1,000,000, floated last year on the London market at 94.

Unfortunately money spent on public works will not increase the population, and the crying want of Iraq is an abundance of labour.

The total amount of grain exported in the last seven years averaged 200,000 tons per annum, which is less than that exported in the years 1900-1905.

In the matter of revenue, in 1935-1936 Iraq just managed her ordinary receipts and ordinary expenditure, but her financial salvation lies entirely in the enormous sums received in royalties from oil produced in the Province of Mosul, the possession of which as between Iraq and Turkey was made the subject of an arbitration by the League of Nations, the award being in favour of Iraq.

Such is the country and the people, to rescue whom from the oppression of the Turk cost Great Britain 100,000 war casualties and probably all told 500 million pounds, or, say, £160 per head of the population.

Lastly, one might have expected in consideration of this vast expenditure some considerable increase in the import trade from Great Britain to Iraq, but apparently the principal people to benefit have been the Japanese, who, importing nothing from the country, have in the

SIR HENRY DOBBS

last six years captured practically the whole of the trade in cotton and silk piece-goods valued at over a million pounds.

The late Sir Henry Dobbs was High Commissioner for Iraq from 1923 to 1929, and gave an address to the Royal Empire Society in February 1933, entitled "Britain's Work in Iraq and Prospects of the New State." He began by saying that to some minds his tale was bound to be disappointing, and he concluded with the following melancholy words:—

"So now to raise up this Iraq we have squandered blood, treasure, and high ability. We have bound debts and taxes on the necks of generations of our descendants. We have seemed by the abandonment of the Assyrians and Kurds to sacrifice our very honour. We have suffered the imputation that on the scene of their agony we living have betrayed the hopes of our dead. You ask, for all this shall we have our reward?

I answer, that I cannot say."

. . . . .

And so the tragedy of Mesopotamia remains—a tragedy of heroism, suffering, wasted lives, and wasted effort, which began in 1914 when the Indian Expeditionary Force entered the Shatt-el-Arab River and which had not ended when military control ceased in 1921.

The soldiers did their work, and by force of arms wrested the country from the Turks.

## THE TRAGEDY OF MESOPOTAMIA

The civilian administrators did their work and established law and order, peace and prosperity, throughout the land.

The statesmen did their work and successfully annulled all that had been accomplished by the soldiers and administrators.

Mesopotamia has been called the cradle of the human race, and was at one time the granary of the world. Will its former glories ever be revived and the enormous sacrifices made by Great Britain ultimately be justified by the evolution of a happy, prosperous, and free nation?

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